

Between March and October 1997, Andrea Fraser conducted extensive interviews with the individual board members of Art Matters Inc. She constructed the following "conversations" by editing and intercutting the transcripts of those individual interviews. The interviews have been laid out in two columns: the romanized text on the right includes material relating directly to Art Matters, while the italicized text on the left includes more general information pertaining to the topics of each chapter. Fraser has undertaken similar interview-based projects for the Kunstverein Munich and the EA-Generali Foundation in Vienna.

The Art Matters Board

The Art Matters board members interviewed by Andrea Fraser are: **Mary Beebe**, director of the Stuart Collection at the University of California San Diego; **Adam Bernstein**, currently senior program officer at the Charles E. Culpepper Foundation; **Cee Scott Brown**, formerly executive director of Creative Time (1985–93) and executive vice-president of Art Matters (1990–96), where he was the driving force behind the Art Matters Catalog, who now sells real estate in the Hamptons; **Laura Donnelley-Morton**, collector, philanthropist, and donor to Art Matters; **Linda Earle**, currently director of the Theater Program at the New York State Council on the Arts, where the Individual Artists Program was founded under her direction in 1984; **Gai Gherardi**, cofounder and owner of I.a.Eyeworks in Los Angeles; **David Mendoza**, formerly executive director of the National Campaign For Freedom of Expression (1991–97), and now on hiatus in Bali; **Laurence Miller**, formerly director of the Laguna Gloria Museum (1974–90), and currently director of ArtPace, a foundation for contemporary art in San Antonio; **Lowery Sims**, curator of twentieth-century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; **Kathy Vargas**, a visual artist and director of the Visual Arts Program of the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio; **Marianne Weems**, president of Art Matters since 1991, who now directs the multimedia performance ensemble, The Builders Association, in New York; **Philip Yenawine**, chair of Art Matters, former director of the Education Department at the Museum of Modern Art, and now codirector of Visual Understanding in Education; and **Bruce Yonemoto**, video artist and filmmaker.

Introduction:

"Supporting artists for their reasons—whatever they were"

Laura: I used to have that in the dining room—you know how you have a portrait of your ancestors in the dining room? It's by Donald Roller Wilson. All of his paintings are of monkeys. There's a very sinister story behind it, about a boarding house where the animals live but the owner, Mrs. Jakenson, is a cruel creature. They're always trying to get away with something, but she always finds out. That's Leon Golub. My children were raised on AMI. They hated artists—hated anything to do with art. But you know what? Now they look back and they say, "What a great childhood!" Sitting and playing a song by Laurie Anderson. Little bits and pieces of life. A very old Nicolas Africano. . . .

Bruce: *I usually wonder why people from the private sector would want to be on certain boards. Is it a social thing? On higher levels, you can schmooze with declared geniuses who've already been sanctioned. You can share the light. But at Art Matters?*

Philip: Art Matters Inc. began because Laura Donnelley had more money than she needed to spend. She wanted to do something for artists. She was involved with the Aspen Art Museum, where I was the director from 1978 to 1982. She began collecting and had a great eye—even before AMI existed, she paid for Jenny Holzer's *Sign on a Truck*. After I left Aspen to become the director of education at the Museum of Modern Art, we developed the idea of a fellowship program for individual artists, especially artists who did not have income from their work. We started making grants in 1985.

Laura: I very quickly made a transition from being interested in collecting and owning art to participating in a process. That's what started AMI. Philip and I talked about artists making art. It was difficult to engage in that process where people just wanted to have nice shows on the wall. Supporting artists was just what I wanted to do with my resources. I've always been interested in art. It was a natural place for me to be involved.

Philip: For women with real fortunes, money can be a curse. Where's your place in life? You look at the role models around you: there are club ladies, there are ladies who lunch. She wanted to have a connection with people that was deeper and more real than money and she wanted to be recognized and treated as a human being.

Laura: Recently, a guy came by who thought he was being turned on to some art patron. He heard, "Oh, you might get some money out of that woman." He didn't know what it was all about. I said, "Remember AMI?" Getting involved in philanthropy was almost like an onus to me. Am I ever going to be able to get beyond that and have a life that's just my creativity? My God, there's this background I

have! What I have to manage in life is money. But I also had a strong streak of genuinely loving to watch another person thrive out of what I could provide.

Philip: AMI was Laura's first foray into major giving, and it was an act of incredible generosity. For five years, she picked up 100 percent of the tab and, at the same, time put funds aside for an endowment—which we didn't even know she was doing. If we found that we were struggling to narrow down our grants, there would be a moment when she'd get tearful and make it possible for us to give more. Most people would have said it was nuts for an individual to give so much more than she could deduct. Most philanthropists create a structure through which they can support whatever interests them. Laura created a board that actually had a vision and a sense of mission: finding artists to support and ways of supporting them. It was like giving us the best present that anybody could have given. None of us had any money to support contemporary artists. All of us worked for organizations that circumscribed our activities. Having the capacity to grant someone money because you just believed in their work empowered us in ways that were really quite wonderful. Laura never insisted that her views were more important or pushed a personal agenda. That's one of the reasons why it was called Art Matters Inc., not the Laura Donnelley Foundation.

Laura: It wouldn't have occurred to me to name AMI after myself. I didn't want to use it to elevate myself into prominence.

Philip: Mary Beebe came up with the name. Art Matters Inc. Ami, friend of artists.

Gai: Most of the boards that I know are made up of people who are not in the community of the artists and often have sensibilities that are in opposition to artists.

Mary: My involvement began, like everybody's, because of Philip. I was director of the Portland Center for Visual Arts in Oregon. Laurence Miller was at the Laguna Gloria in Austin. And Cee Scott Brown was the director of the Holly Solomon Gallery and later of Creative Time.

Laurence: To a certain extent, the history of the concerns of AMI are Philip Yenawine's concerns. While there existed a commonality of concern, very rarely do I remember conversations about issues that had not been brought to the table by Philip.

Philip: In 1990, we decided to diversify the board. There was a discussion about what complexion it should take, should it include money people or not. We decided that the better stance was to continue to be a board of professionals. We didn't want to create a situation where half the board can't give but knows something while the other is just there for money.

Adam: At most private foundations there's not one artist or arts administrator on the board of trustees.

Linda: I've been involved with AMI since 1990. Other people were brought on quite soon after I was: Bruce Yonemoto, Kathy Vargas, Lowery Sims, Adam Bernstein, and Gai Gherardi, the most recent. David Mendoza was on before me.

Marianne: And the gap between staff and trustees is usually enormous and unbridgeable.

Marianne: When I finally had to leave my job as AMI's first administrator I was asked to join the board. It was a decision for a younger artist and smarty-pants over an older money-bags. Then I became president.

Laurence: The decision not to pass the foundation leadership down the hierarchy but to give the presidency to Marianne was a value statement in itself.

Lowery: There are very few instances where trusteeship doesn't devolve into rife paternalism. Usually, there really isn't much contact with the constituency.

Kathy: That lack of familiarity tends to make trustees more conservative and less aware of the drastic needs of the arts community.

David: The AMI board has a different culture than most in that we're all arts professionals. But we're in many different roles: Philip works in education; Linda and Adam with funders; Mary, Laurence, and Lowery as curators; Kathy, Bruce, and Marianne as artists.

Laurence: Speaking as someone who has suffered from trustees for years and years and years as a museum director, I have very mixed feelings about trusteeship. Most of the trustees I've worked with weren't interested in conflict or learning.

Kathy: Because all of us are in the art world, we could use all of our multiple levels of expertise to bring different artists from different areas and ethnicities into the process.

Gai: As a business person, I was concerned about how appropriate I would be as a board member.

Bruce: Gai is one of the only corporate people I've served with on a board who truly understood her role in an arts organization.

Linda: We could cut out a whole layer of bureaucracy and deal directly with artists' requests. And in considering applications, we were free of the kinds of concerns that the public dollar is tied to. We could make decisions that would be called arbitrary and capricious in the view of the state, decisions based on feeling. But it was understood that feeling was more than a personal thought passing like a cloud through your mind. It was based on years of experience and knowledge of the field.

Gai: I'm often asked, "How do you judge?" My God! For somebody like me, I feel incredibly unable to judge. But through discussions and arguments and through informing oneself, a decision can emerge that's very solid.

David: I brought everything to our panels, from my degree in art history to being a gallery dealer, directing nonprofits that support artists, and years of attending performances and looking at art.

Mary: Art professionals are considered elitist when we say that we know and others don't. But we have studied and spent time. We have a legitimate interest. Not that all of us agree. . . .

Adam: I kind of step back and let the curators. . . . That's not my academic background.

Bruce: Some of the board members, mainly because it wasn't their job, had limited experience with experimental art, particularly art made by younger people.

Laurence: Lowery, for instance. Artists that AMI supports are not artists she is generally concerned with.

Lowery: I'm the really conservative one on the board. My strengths are in painting.

Mary: *We would have arguments about whether painting is dead. A lot of it was pretty boring. But installation art can be boring, too.*

Linda: It was great to go in and have your agenda totally upset. Sometimes I thought, "Am I losing my mind? I usually hate this kind of stuff."

Bruce: I, of course, have an agenda. I like the really, really idiosyncratic.

Mary: My personal criteria? I guess it's a gut-level thing: what makes me think, takes me someplace I haven't been. I'm looking for a spark, an individual voice, a striving toward confidence, something that provokes a real response in me.

Adam: *Every member of the board has an expansive and tolerant view of what the arts should be allowed to be: that there should be room for exploration, that we shouldn't be quick to draw lines around what is or isn't art. There is by no means a single vision on this board, but I think there is a single openness.*

Laurence: *Most organizations support artists for their own reasons, not the artists' reasons. We really tried to support artists for their reasons—whatever they were. I don't remember any discussions about values, or about what institutions call value clarification. There was just an assumption that, whatever your values were, they were valuable. We knew that the way for individuals to learn was to take the risk that their own ideas might be overturned.*

Marianne: *AMI posed a challenge to more conventional foundation practices. It was structured to embrace things that would otherwise be disruptive. Remember when you came in and did that little performance?*

Andrea: That was in 1986. I had just done my first gallery-talk performance at the New Museum in New York. You suggested that I apply to AMI but I had no documentation of the performance. Not a single photograph! So the board let me come into a granting session and perform a little piece of it. It was my first grant.

Marianne: *Most foundations would never take the risk of coming face-to-face with an applicant. What else did we do? I'm trying to think of the other. . . irregularities.*

Phillip: Sometimes we gave small grants just so people could produce better slides.

Lowery: We were flexible. If we got a fax saying, "Karen Finley needs \$1,500 to do something or it won't happen," we could act quickly.

Marianne: There were good-fairy grants to people who hadn't applied but we wished had.

Phillip: AMI was an artist's advocate. Our point was money to work. We discouraged proposals and didn't care about resumes. We just wanted to look at the art.

Marianne: In four years the applications grew from 35 to 600 per granting session.

Phillip: Since our grants were not big, people applying usually needed the money to work. And the vast majority of the artists that we supported had never gotten funding from anybody. It was a message that this work matters. It has a compelling reason for being on the earth. It has values that forward an agenda.

Mary: I used to argue for giving fewer bigger grants. But, boy, when you get the feedback that we got. . . .

Gai: The story from somebody that \$2,000 meant the difference between thinking they were the biggest piece of shit in the world and were going to have to go to work at Dairy Queen and forget about everything they ever thought was important. . . .

Laurence: Or a 4:00 a.m. conversation with Felix Gonzalez-Torres when he started talking about how important it was when this weird foundation gave him a \$1,500 grant. He didn't remember that I was on the AMI board.

Cee: We helped validate work. We gave Jenny Holzer one of her first grants, when a lot of people thought her work wasn't art, just words. It meant a lot to her.

Mary: As the '80s wore on, we were proud to give grants to people no one else was going to give money to, people who defy the Jesse Helmses of this world.

Laurence: We supported art that articulated issues and concerns in confrontational ways, voices that would jeopardize the funding base of mainstream arts institutions. But in addition to encouraging artistic subversion, AMI was also subversive in its management.

Lowery: We're now a foundation without assets, but we are still a foundation with ideas. I hope we can raise money to bring people together and talk about some of the gut-wrenching issues in art in a nonbureaucratic way.

Cee: We either close this chapter and close the book, or open up the next chapter and see what happens. I'm of the mind that this is not about closing the book.

Bruce: I'm an activist in the promotion of any critical discourse in any of the arts. I'm not going to stop and David is not going to stop. Linda is not going to stop. I don't think any of us will stop. It's important that critical agendas become institutionalized in some way; I don't care if that means they're no longer as radical as they once were. They're still radical in today's context.

Cee: For a small foundation, we did have a lot of impact. A lot of issues were addressed and a lot of repercussions came from the seed money or input contributed by AMI and by individual board members. In the arts in this country, in the '80s and '90s, AMI was at the forefront of all the advocacy that was being led on behalf of individual artists, on behalf of artists with AIDS, and on behalf of freedom of expression. That's pretty remarkable. And then on top of all that, to set out to find a way to help artists become self-sustaining. . . . That was a brave little fellow.

Chapter 1:

“Art is not lofty. It can be painful, ugly, and difficult.”

Linda: What makes the strongest statement about who we are is what we funded.

Laura: With AMI, the mission was just there off the bat. It was about artists making art. I wanted the money to go to supporting artists.

Laurence: *Money to make work, especially for younger artists, was very, very difficult to come by. There was a whole underculture of artists that was falling through the cracks and where \$1,500 was just a lot of money.*

Bruce: One criterion at AMI was art that has some ability to transform. Another was art with the ability to look at something from a different, original, or controversial perspective.

David: I don't think that we as an organization said, “We want controversial subject matter.” But the artists who applied knew that if there was nudity, if there was something about menstruation or about lesbians, that all we would be looking at is if the work was good. In another context, they could worry that it wouldn't get money because the funder didn't want to fund the content. The subject matter didn't matter, but the work did have to be—in our collective minds—interesting work.

Kathy: The language of our guidelines was there to say, “If you do activist work, if you do politically loaded work, if you do culturally loaded work or sociopolitical commentary, you can apply.” Risk-taking was understood on a variety of levels: content, media, style. For instance, at a time when painting, generally, was very large and high-priced, we found a painter who was doing very beautiful, small pieces that were about AIDS. I'm trying to remember his name. . . . He had a beautiful series of teeny little paintings. The paintings themselves were. . . . There were Pierrot-like characters, dressed as court jesters. Beautiful little paintings. But the subject matter was difficult and New York galleries that need to make heavy-duty rent were not going to be interested in showing teeny little paintings. But the work was absolutely wonderful and we gave him some money. I think AMI was established with that mission.

Philip: *That was Patrick Webb.*

Laurence: All of us had an abiding concern for the welfare of artists, but the importance that artists had for each of us was different. It depended on our contexts, our own lives and the lives of our communities. There were no discussions in the beginning about sexual or political issues, or freedom of speech. Those concerns evolved as a result of the need, when it became clear that our resources could do the most good by supporting work dealing with issues that made it unfundable.

Laurence: John Kelly made \$9,500 dollars the year we gave him his first grant—including our grant.

Cee: *Performance art still isn't supported by the market. And John still can't pay his rent.*

Bruce: *You're not going to support yourself selling videotapes either.*

Laurence: *The foundation community and major public funding entities in this country have essentially told artists that they have to prove themselves in the marketplace. It's publish or perish: if you publish you can be part of this community, with no thoughts of what the publishing is about.*

Laurence: One of the few clear, conscious decisions that we made was to funnel money to artists before they had been scarred by the marketplace. We wanted to give them an opportunity to have an edge before they had to pay the price demanded of so many successful artists whose work is almost entirely determined by the market.

Bruce: *The marketplace does not invite criticism.*

Mary: We wanted to fund artists that weren't getting support from other sources and who produced art that wasn't easily bought. That ranged from AIDS and gay-related art to installation art that was too unwieldy for homes and galleries, to artists who simply weren't big names.

Philip: We were interested in work that galleries didn't validate and couldn't sell and that artists couldn't support themselves with, which is true of video, performance, and conceptual work.

Linda: *Performance in the 1980s and early '90s was coming from outside theatrical traditions. The artists were in untried territory, they were making new forms and dealing with issues that weren't being dealt with in mainstream theater.*

Bruce: *With single-channel “video art” and installation art with a video component, a discourse was developing that involved a real critique of media—feminist and gender critique, political critique. That wasn't happening anywhere else.*

Lowery: *Electronic media and performance were controversial forms for more established funders.*

Marianne: As soon as the word got out, we also got a lot of applications from emerging artists doing critical and theoretical work, image/text and language-based work.

Linda: *What drove all of us crazy from the beginning were funders setting the tune and dividing up the world into different media.*

Philip: *Many forms and interests that had been marginalized were coming forward: multi-culturalism and feminism, as well as new media like performance. At that point there was*

still incredible moral and ethical leadership that came from governmental bodies. There was tremendous commitment at the NEA and NYSICA to supporting marginalized artists, to being multicultural and open to new media. And they really put their money where their mouths were. The NEA was the first organization to create categories for new media. They cut ground and they did so by talking to people in the field. NYSICA was the first arts council in the country, and I joined the staff in 1965. We invented the peer-panel system as we now know it, for better or worse, in 1967.

Bruce: Public funding helped critical work to flourish. Gender and cultural politics and the politics of ethnicity were issues that people on peer panels were interested in discussing.

Linda: The process public funders worked with was a good process in that decisions made were based on certain criteria. Fairness came into play and was observed. We could articulate what we saw in terms of the quality of the project, not in terms of what we would like the world to look like. But most public agencies are set up basically to buy specific projects. Applicants have to make a case or not. There is almost no room for exploration which may not yield a product.

Phillip: Almost everybody who got grants from governmental agencies had a reputation behind them. Grant-giving has basically been about recognizing accomplishment. Guggenheim also awarded according to distinction.

Bruce: That's not really about supporting artists. It's about symbols of art.

Phillip: I think that there's a resistance to funding individuals to make art. It runs against the Protestant work ethic, like welfare: if you want money, earn a living.

Marianne: There are very few foundations that give directly to individuals.

Phillip: It was made very difficult for foundations to get IRS approval to fund individuals directly, basically to prevent foundation trustees from giving money to relatives without it being taxed.

Phillip: At first, we also allowed alternative spaces to apply and we tried to fund artist fees and honoraria. But by the late '80s, we saw that there was a need to concentrate our moneys on individual artists.

Phillip: There was a period in the '80s when quite a lot of money was available for organizations, though individual artists were still getting fucked. Administrators were making decent salaries and got health insurance and could go to conferences. A lot of money was going for overhead. They had rich folks on their boards. Many organizations sustained themselves well beyond the life of their missions—there are some that could close with nobody caring, at this point.

Laura: Museums were always trying to get in the door by saying that they wanted us to fund a project. They really just wanted somebody else to pay for it.

Phillip: Museums rarely give artists any money for showing their work. If you're having a show at the Museum of Modern Art, you and your dealer better be prepared to dig pretty deeply into your pockets because it's not going to be covered by the museum. They think that by showing you they're bestowing a huge honor—at the same time, of course, pretending that it has nothing to do with the market.

Laurence: One of the great tragedies of museums in this country has been that so many still operate on the historical model of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They still believe that the only good artist is a dead artist.

Lowery: I work in a very conservative institution with very traditional values. Our exhibition program is for established, world-renowned artists. That's the nature of the beast. It's not going to change.

Cee: In 1984 I started a performance-art archive at the Museum of Modern Art and organized two evenings of performance there. When they were dismantling the big Picasso show I suggested that we rig some spotlights, put in a row of chairs, and have performances in the empty galleries. I was told categorically, "No, we need those rooms for the Picasso crates." The Picasso crates were more important than an art form that was really burgeoning! They were not ready to take that on.

Laurence: A lot of institutions see artists as a liability, including organizations that were created specifically to support them.

Lowery: Many curators do feel that artists are idiots and have to be spoken for.

Cee: I do think that people fear the arts. Jesse Helms didn't crack down on the arts just because it was an easy target. He also understood the power of the arts and the power of individual artists.

Mary: People are becoming less tolerant, and that means that art is more and more important. Engaging something I don't understand can be frightening or sometimes fantastically beautiful, but what's important is trying to learn to look and ask, "What is this about?" It's not about liking it. It's about what you learn.

Bruce: There has to be a place where a discourse can develop about any subject, be it in painting or film or video or media: where you can discuss the merits or the social implications of work or give a voice to people of color. Individual artists add to the outlook of society and question values that people tend to just accept.

Phillip: We had a notion of art that changed people's lives: art that when you confronted it, you couldn't ignore, you couldn't simply pass by, art that attempted to make a difference, to communicate something important, that deserved a life. The underlying assumption is that art is somewhat like sleep and love. It's essential for human existence. You don't know exactly why you need it, but you can't be fully human without it. Modern life has tried to put art into a box, but it belongs in the intersections between people in real life.

Lowery: Art is not lofty. It never was lofty. Art was meant to challenge and to bring people into connection with themselves. And that can be painful, ugly, and difficult.

Adam: We need to encourage voices that constantly challenge our perception of what is right and wrong, good and evil: our basic perceptions about civil society. We need to have people who constantly upset us with troubling questions. The questions that artists are asking about gender issues, sexual orientation, racism are defining how we go forward in our society.

Chapter 2:

“Working hours and hours and hours and hours and hours and hours just organizing.”

Laurence: We began to focus on the AIDS crisis as all of us, and Philip in particular, began losing friends at such a rapid pace. AMI was able to support Visual AIDS and the Red Ribbon Project. We didn't even intend to be the primary funders of those organizations, although we were for a long time.

Mary: *We were socially conscious and tried to be responsive and responsible to issues that were out there.*

Philipp: We were phasing out our funding for organizations in order to focus on individual artists, but we looked at the amount of money we'd given to organizations in '89, about \$100,000, and assigned that amount of money to just two organizations. Half of it went to two fellowships, one to Patrick O'Connell and one to Alexander Gray, to run Visual AIDS.

Kathy: There was a question as to whether it would be better to support individual artists or to engage in a lobbying effort. Less and less money was going to be available for the type of artists that we were funding. The mission of AMI was to support excellence but also to support difficult artwork. We always understood that it wasn't just about giving grants but was also about doing education and activism and lobbying to encourage individual artists to keep making their difficult work.

Cee: Some of us felt that these were the issues that were at hand right now, these were things we've always been interested in, and this is a way we can make an impact. It's different from what we'd been doing but, so what? Others were saying, "That's like thirty grants." Yeah, it could be thirty grants, but if these issues aren't handled now, what difference does it make? It's about safeguarding an environment in which art can be created safely and treated with respect.

Laura: I wanted the money to go to artists—and that was probably where we started to have divergence. From '89 into '90 there were powerful, powerful, issues that were permeating every aspect of art-making. They had to do with AIDS and with First Amendment rights. I understood that. I really got it. But that didn't mean that I felt that was where we should be directing our funding. I didn't want AMI to become a political instrument or another radicalized organization, and I didn't feel right doing that personally. I certainly had a lot of concern about AIDS. I don't think anybody at that time who related to people in the art world didn't. There were just so many people dying. I just didn't want to set a course for myself and AMI that had all involved so much confrontation and politicizing.

Mary: Laura was always a little bit uneasy with some of the violent and the angry art, and the advocacy was related to that.

Laura: There were times that I didn't like the art that was getting made, but it really wasn't about that. And I wasn't against what informed that art. I just didn't want AMI to become about those issues. AMI was established to support art-making, including political art-making, but with the emphasis on the making of art, not the politics. It's not that I wasn't willing to entertain some controversy. I can, and believe me I did, consider a lot of points of view. But when we were giving a total of \$150,000 and they wanted to give \$50,000 to a person to do a residency in Washington, basically as a lobbyist. . . I didn't want to go there. Even though we had an incredibly egalitarian format at AMI, at the last minute it always came down to, Was I willing to put money on the table for that? That was very difficult for them and for me. It was always really difficult. . . You look like you want to cry.

Marianne: Laura would never ask anyone to renege on a grant because of her opinion. But it was the midst of the AIDS crisis and Philip was ripped apart and half-crazy from grief most of the time because so many of his friends all over the country were dying every day. Some of the discussion that took place at AMI was just too painful for him. I think it was very sad for everyone, very sad.

Laura: I loved the process and really didn't want to let go, but I knew I had to let them do what was important to them.

Mary: After Laura left we asked ourselves, What will our role be now? We have nobody to answer to but ourselves. We can do things without hesitation. I have to say we felt freer. We never worried that Laura wouldn't write the check at the end of the day, but we did want her to feel good about doing something worthwhile.

David: *Legally, we ultimately got a clear answer that our advocacy activities were not a problem. Lobbying and advocacy are two different things. If you meet with elected officials but there's no legislation, that's advocacy. If there is pending legislation, it's lobbying. Nonprofits are forbidden to get involved in electoral campaigns, but can still spend up to 20 percent of their budget on advocacy that relates to their program. I don't think Laura's concern had to do with what we were doing advocacy about. I think it had more to do with her philanthropic background. In the context of foundation-giving, money for lobbying is like a little red light going off. With Laura, there was not an opposition in political viewpoints at all. It had, however, become her philosophy that being oppositional or negative was not good.*

Laurence: It never occurred to me that we were funding against something. I think that we would have funded pretty much the same way had there not been Jesse Helms and homophobia, because the nature of the foundation was to be extremely empathetic and concerned. There may be some artists who would not have been funded without the AIDS crisis. I'm not certain.

Marianne: There is a point where polemical work can become purely didactic and not necessarily that interesting. We certainly saw a lot of work like that in the early '90s. The best examples of work which excited the board most were works that had both aesthetic sophistication and a message. Everything from Gran Fury to the Guerrilla Girls. The Donald Moffett grant, which we gave him before Gran Fury, occasioned the argument with Laura about being negative. The text was violent, but it was also beautiful, and it went with an image of a daisy which was also quite beautiful. It was odd that that argument happened over that specific image.

Adam: *It's a role of the artist to be confrontational, to challenge, but it's not the only function of contemporary art. The way I put it was, If I spit on your foot, I'm going to get your attention, but I'm not sure I'll put you in the frame of mind where you want to engage in a dialogue. There are times to spit on people's feet but I think we also have to spend time engaging people.*

Philip: *Just because I was concerned and stood up and spoke about issues; I was seen as an activist. And it scared people. Even just defending Mapplethorpe—not that I think he's such a great artist. The only thing that he made that was close to art, really, were those images that transgressed. The rest of it is just decorative.*

David: *There were times when I was very resentful and angry about the hesitancy and lack of support for advocacy and political activism around the issues that were affecting all of us—and not just from the foundations, but from arts organization, as well.*

Mary: I felt great about the advocacy AMI did, I thought it was really important. Although there were moments when it seemed like we were overdoing it or were being pushed so strongly in that direction that other voices weren't being heard.

Kathy: There was a discussion at one time about whether or not to make a further commitment to activist work, advocacy, and even lobbying. If we had honestly felt that advocacy was the best way to go, that would have been an option for us.

Cee: As AMI became inextricably entwined by several of its personalities in activities that were important to its board, AMI became associated with advocacy. Sometimes it was difficult for people to distinguish between the different entities. Two of the founders of Visual AIDS, Philip and I, were board members of AMI, and I was also on the board of the Campaign. It was a wonderful little beehive.

Marianne: *Starting in about 1986, Philip became very politicized in every aspect of his life. So did Cee, who joined the Gay and Lesbian Task Force very early on.*

Cee: AMI gave us a vehicle to provide support. If I was sitting around a table and there was a need for money to get the Red Ribbon Project off the ground, I could say, AMI will put in \$2,500 if Warhol will put in \$2,500 and if New York Community Trust will put in \$2,500 and J.P. Morgan will put in \$2,500. By opening my big mouth and spending \$2,500 without even having board approval, I could get foundations to ante up money even when they didn't want to and bring in \$10,000—enough money to get things off the ground. AMI enabled us to put a little money where our mouths were. Philip would do the same thing. David would do the same thing working on issues of freedom of expression. They needed \$1,500 to get some people that were geographically repressed somewhere to a meeting. Once in a while he would take a leap and say, I think AMI will put up the few hundred dollars for that. We were small-fries in the foundation community—we had no financial clout. But what we did do was stir up the waters.

Philip: *I was not at the first meeting for Visual AIDS. Bill Olander from the New Museum, Tom Sokolowski from the Grey Art Gallery, Robert Atkins from the Village Voice, and a few other people began it. They got together out of concern that there were so many people in the visual arts world who were dying of AIDS. They wanted to create an information center to keep a record of the art of the people who died. At the first general meeting I attended,*

John Perrault said, "Why don't we ask museums to participate in a moratorium, like the Vietnam War moratorium in 1972?" My hand shot into the air immediately. "Oh, don't be ridiculous, they may have done that then, but they would never do that now. Actually, most of them didn't even do it then." That put an end to the conversation. Then I felt tremendously guilty. Who the fuck are you? How do you know? I kept thinking about it. Then the idea of the title, *Day Without Art*, flashed into my head. So I went back and said, "I think I was out of line." I volunteered to contact ten or twelve museums and other arts organizations across the country to see if they would participate. I contacted people I knew and I got yesses back from everybody. They said, "We would not do a moratorium, that's too negative, but we would do something." We chose December 1st.

Cee: AMI was supporting Visual AIDS, but Visual AIDS was also just a lot of people power. The first two Days Without Art, Philip and I were working hours and hours and hours and hours and hours just organizing. It was voluntary, and it came about through diligence and time spent—basically, just out of desperation. What can we do to make a difference? I think the first Day Without Art got quite a bit of visibility for the organization. It did capture people's imaginations. Imagine, if you will, that all the creative people in the world were gone due to AIDS. How that would impact you? Even if you don't particularly think of yourself as someone in the art world.

Phillip: Patrick O'Connell volunteered to set up mailing lists—on AMI computers. Out of the 3,000 notices we sent maybe 1,000 organizations agreed to participate. It was more successful in commercial galleries and university museums. A lot of municipal museums were too conservative to participate until two or three years down the road. But it really snowballed after the second year. It became like folk art, with people choosing their own way of doing it. There was no necessary form.

Cee: One year a cable station wanted to do a moment without television, thirty seconds when the screen just went black. And they gave free subscriptions for that evening to an extra three million people.

Phillip: Some places took work down. The Metropolitan Museum ended up taking down Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein, which is funny because, of course, she's one of the few out dykes they had a picture of. How they chose to do that. . . . What was that? Weird. But it was amazing that they did anything at all. The Museum of Modern Art became the centerpiece despite the fact that the director of the Modern, Dick Oldenberg, did not want to participate. But he couldn't say no. He just hated me after that. Agnes Gund gave us money to cover the expenses of having a kind of memorial service. David Wojnarowicz and Jane Smith read statements. Leonard Bernstein played songs he had written for people who died. It was well attended and very touching—although it couldn't be all that touching because the Garden Hall of the Modern is like the middle of a shopping mall. The second year we added *Night Without Light* and tried to get the skyline of New York turned off for fifteen minutes in recognition of those who had died. And it worked! We did it! One could adopt the position, "Who am I? I can't change anything so why should I even bother? My vote doesn't count. My voice won't be heard." We discovered that four or five people with some time and some ideas and some energy could get the skyline of New York turned off. It was incredible. A lot of people scoffed at a Day Without Art because it was a way for a museum that didn't give a shit about anybody the rest of the year to cleanse its conscience. One of my points was that if you got museums to consider participating, you got to the boardrooms eventually. And in the boardrooms sit the people who run insurance companies and hospitals and so on and so forth. At the first or second Day Without Art, Elizabeth Taylor came and spoke at

MoMA. It was to an audience of celebs, but it got a lot of media. It was all about gestures. The Red Ribbon Project, too. ACT UP got pissed because they thought the whole thing was silly. But what happened is really about power. That Ribbon ended up on a stamp. That was the brainchild of two or three people. The idea was to get everybody at the Tony Awards ceremony one year to wear red ribbons. And then it got on the Grammy Awards and then it got on the Academy Awards. It was beg, borrow, and steal. It was cottage industry. A lot of it was donated ribbon and groups of guys would just sit there, night after night, making them.

Cee: We would also have people in women's shelters, for example, making ribbons. Organizations around the city or around the country were calling. We need six hundred ribbons for the Oscars. Can you get us that? And we'd provide them by buying the ribbon and taking it over to the women's shelter and getting people actively involved because they liked the cause. It was all voluntary work.

Phillip: It was the same thing with needle exchange. During the activist late '80s and early '90s, there were people around who were willing to put in the time.

Cee: Another thing Philip and I started was Future Safe. It was a booklet we developed to get information out to artists who are living with AIDS and other life-threatening diseases on how they can control their legacy.

Phillip: I got labeled as a fag-activist, which ultimately had ramifications for AMI.

Cee: Visual AIDS also did the Electric Blanket at different locations around the world, usually in conjunction with World AIDS Day. It was a slide-projection with music for an exterior space about people that had died of AIDS or were living with AIDS, with images about activism as well as remembrance. I'm not sure if it's still going. I've lost touch.

Marianne: AMI became known as a political entity, which is frowned upon for private foundations.

Phillip: By '92 I was completely burnt out and practically everyone I knew was dying. So I pulled back. About the only thing I didn't quit doing was AMI.

Chapter 3:

“We were a pretty WASPy group.”

Philip: AMI was established to help a lot of young people in smaller ways. But we were also very concerned with making our program geographically diverse and media diverse. And we always counted the grants to make sure there was a balance of women versus men—but that was really easy because work by women remains vastly more interesting than work by men.

Cee: We all knew how peer panels worked; if the peers don't think of you as a peer, you're not going to get funding. If you're making work out in Bumfuck, Iowa, and nobody's been there and nobody knows who you are, your chances of getting funding elsewhere are limited.

Cee: That was one of the reasons we wanted to focus on geographic distribution and to have a national board of people who were active in the artists' communities reaching out within those communities.

Mary: We tried to encourage applications from different areas. Rather than just sit in a loft in New York and give out money, we felt we should educate ourselves about what was going on elsewhere. We went to Chicago, Seattle, San Diego.

Cee: We had nominators distribute the applications and then we called the nominators to ask about the impact the applicants had on the community or just to ask them what we weren't seeing in the really shitty slides. If we were told the work was good, we funded it.

Laurence: AMI did become well-enough known that the people who needed us got to us somehow. Artists that had gotten grants from outside the centers would start referring other artists and slowly we began to build up a network. Eventually, however, we probably did become comfortable with the fact that the predominant amount of money was going to end up in New York.

Mary: It always seemed that the best stuff was done in a few places, like New York and Los Angeles. We'd say, it's Oklahoma, for heaven's sake, give it a break. But you can't support schlock just because it's from Oklahoma when there's a lot of good work in New York and a really crying need.

Mary: Then, of course, multicultural waves started hitting our consciousness. We realized that we were a pretty WASPy group and that we needed to put our money where our mouth was if we were going to talk about ethnic diversity as well as geographic diversity. We needed to get some representation on the board that spoke to that. We always had guest panelists like Adrian Piper, Joe Harvey Allen, bell hooks, Nayland Blake. Bruce Yonemoto was one.

David: When AMI decided to expand the board, I think they felt they needed more diversity, not the capital-D diversity, but lower-case diversity. It wasn't about being multicultural so much as wanting a broader reach in terms of vision and governance and policies than existed within the original core of people.

Bruce: Linda Earle and I were asked to come onto the board because they needed advice and experience about media.

Linda: I was invited to join the board because I had a really big, multidisciplinary overview and was in contact with a lot of artists. But I think part of it was also demographic: they wanted a person of color.

Kathy: The reason I was asked to join the board had to do with coming from a different part of the universe, in a sense. I was the director of a Latino arts program at San Antonio, Texas, so I was part of the art world, but I was also part of the, or of a, Latin community—part of a Latino art world. I was in touch with different geographic regions: Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and California, as well as some Native-American peoples. I'm also a photographer. And I was also a curator who saw a lot of work. I had geographic diversity, I had cultural diversity, I had disciplinary diversity. . . .

Linda: There's always a question of what's expected of the people of color—or the people from Texas. Are you expecting that to be all they will contribute? Everybody is more complicated than that.

Linda: I didn't see my role at AMI as advocating for African-American artists, but I do happen to know a lot of them and was able to speak to their work and give some perspective on what they were doing.

Kathy: AMI did not make a specific point about diversity in its guidelines before 1993, but I think that's because we were covering it all along. We didn't have to make it a separate concern. We were always supporting gender- and sexual preference-related work. We were always looking at Latino work, but we were looking at incredibly good Latino work. We were rewarding incredibly good Latino work, rewarding incredibly good African-American work, incredibly good Asian-American work. We didn't have to run out to find culture we hadn't covered.

Mary: It's about providing access. I believe in affirmative action. I also understand that some people see it as another stamp. But people also have to recognize that they have privilege for reasons that are not in and of themselves, and that may be harder still.

Linda: When I got into arts administration over twenty years ago, there were very few people like myself. It was a very class-specific line of work. Being an artist, past a certain point, was also very class-specific. I don't see class as an issue of need versus merit, but an element in the decision to support a broader group of people to pursue artistic expression. It's also about the idea of what an artist is, of whose work is valuable, or professional.

David: Two things started happening in the early 1960s: the Civil Rights Movement really advanced and public support for culture appeared. In 1960 the New York State Council on the Arts was formed. The Free Speech Movement emerged. And in 1965 the NEA was

founded. Those were parallel, even intertwined, developments. With public support came a push for more democratic, more diverse support. That was the direction we were going in as a country. Diverse communities—be they women, Latinos, or gays and lesbians—started to gain political will and power. There were complaints that NYSCA wasn't supportive enough of communities of color, but they did a lot more than anybody else was doing, and that pot of money at NYSCA was a couple of million dollars more going in to fund community groups than ever existed before. It was not enough, but it was a beginning. Slowly, foundations started to follow NEA and NYSCA in that regard. Eventually, every state and city got its own arts council. And, over the years, that money eventually built an infrastructure of organizations that made the cultural community quite different than it was before 1960. Before 1960 the only places to get money were from a rich person, a foundation, or ticket sales. And the individuals and foundations giving money were not, for the most part, interested in diversity. It was like a private club.

Lowery: When I came to the Met, I perceived it as an interesting place to follow through on an agenda of diversity that I had set for my career. I've spent the last twenty years trying to push the limits of the perimeters here. But all throughout my career I've also recognized that I have interests that are outside of this museum. That's why I wanted to join the AMI board.

Linda: This is a board of real frontline arts people. I suppose people outside of AMI may have looked at us and wondered why we didn't have the kind of people who are on other boards, people with big bucks. Maybe that's the kind of diversity other people thought we ought to have had more of.

Adam: Foundations are started by people with money. And whom do they know? They know other captains of industry. They know the attorneys and accountants who serve their industry. They know their associates. They know the people at the opera and the ballet, the people they have over for dinner and socialize with. They don't know people who are working in culture in communities of color. Those are the people on foundation boards, and they bring their biases to that board, including a pretty narrow conception of art.

David: The basic message about diversifying funding that was coming from public agencies was that everyone puts money into this government and therefore, as a distribution system, in a democratic society, everybody should get a little back. Public agencies that support the arts are places where we're all shareholders, where we can go and make requests. If you go to a private foundation or corporation for funding, you have a harder case to make.

Adam: A study done by the Foundation Center about funding in the arts from 1983 to 1993 showed that over 30 percent of all foundation dollars went to one percent of the arts institutions. That one percent probably reflects the composition of the boards of foundations, and that's what's wrong. You don't have trustees going to . . . I mean, forget the Caribbean Cultural Center. They don't even go to the Studio Museum in Harlem. Of course, if you say you support the arts and you give to Lincoln Center, you are indeed supporting the arts. The problem is when that foundation doesn't state in their guidelines that they only support major institutions, that they only support certain kinds of art. They hide behind vague guidelines, and there's no accountability.

David: If I went to a foundation and said, You need to have some more diversity on your board because as a member of the public I think there should be, I wouldn't get anywhere.

It remains to be seen whether there is legal recourse; whether foundations have to meet the standard of nondiscrimination because of their tax-exempt status. They don't look at it that way now.

Adam: All boards have a responsibility to look at all grantees equitably, respecting their own guidelines and applying them equally to all applicants. I do think AMI shares some of the sins of the foundation community around the issue of equity. We did have the propensity to support our friends. Everybody has agendas, be they conservative or progressive, that can come into play in ways that don't relate to the guidelines. I just think that we have to leave that at the door.

Adam: I also think we have to do a better job in contemporary arts at engaging communities.

Kathy: When we talk about community, we often forget that we have gay and lesbian communities, we have AIDS communities, we have disenfranchised communities, we have impoverished communities, we have communities from many different ethnic backgrounds and many different languages, and that those communities have many different outlooks and many different needs, and are going to react positively to many different types of art, and all of those communities are going to, at one point or another, want to see themselves reflected on that so-called American canvas. We really need to remember that we are communities, plural. We are many. And who I mean by "we" is every single body in the US.

Kathy: When we start talking about the needs of all of these different communities, often the funders themselves, or the public itself, becomes offended and challenged and frightened. Maybe the greatest thing that AMI did was to say, "We're not afraid of difference, we're not afraid of any type of diversity, political, ethnic, gender, sexual preference. We're not afraid. We're going to look at all this different art and we're going to fund the best work we can find and we're not going to be afraid of what we might learn about ourselves by funding it."

Lowery: Within the diversity community there are many ways in which cutting-edge issues are shielded away from—I'll speak for the African-American community.

Bruce: I never shared the pure PC view of history or what art means. There was a tendency to limit the scope of art to documentary form: documenting identity politics, without humor, without irony. AMI was unique because we weren't just focused on the PC agenda of that particular period. . . . Well, there was definitely a gay agenda at AMI. Sure.

Chapter 4:

“The big boys were not going to march to the front lines.”

Laura: . . . and these are Mapplethorpes I gave to my parents for my fortieth birthday. They're portraits of my children. Most of my friends can't understand why I like them, but I love them. They're really portraits of Mapplethorpe in disguise.

David: *With the public-funding crisis, we were challenged in a way we haven't been since the McCarthy era, where the integrity, the ethics, the value of art and intellectual inquiry were coming under attack. We were being scapegoated by the Christian right and we weren't prepared for it. I still can remember April 1989 when I got a call, "Did you hear that they're complaining about SECCA's fellowship to Andres Serrano?" Then, just a couple weeks later, the Mapplethorpe exhibit at the Corcoran was canceled. Starting that May, I was in the midst of it almost every day for years. We were caught off guard. The Corcoran's decision definitely sent a message to people like Jesse Helms. We can scare the shit out of these cultural folks and get them to do whatever we want.*

Bruce: Things deteriorated quickly after the Corcoran canceled the Mapplethorpe exhibition. AMI definitely took a proactive position. The need became even more critical. There wasn't any support for radical gay art or sexually explicit art. We could give to Karen Finley and Holly Hughes and other people of the world whose work was treading on turf that made it hard for government to fund it.

Kathy: We gave grants to many artists who might easily have their First Amendment rights violated.

Linda: *I was the director of the individual artists program at NYSCA, and had been since its inception in 1984. We had had a crisis in 1988–89 with potential censorship but had defended the Council's position not to judge content: if the project was good we were going to support it. It was not and has not been a factor in our appropriation. But that experience, along with what was happening at the NEA, definitely created a different atmosphere. It had a chilling effect. Our board members became more nervous about support for individual artists and there were artists who didn't want to go through a big deal with the state. The budget was halved in the space of a year. Then, in 1990, visual arts as a category was cut from the individual artist program entirely. Our board felt it was too troublesome an area. The perception was that individual artists had started the problems that we were having. Mapplethorpe and Serrano were all they could think about.*

Gee: *I was very unpopular when I ran Creative Time because I would not take NEA money with the Helms Amendment barring support for work that dealt with homosexuality. I wouldn't sign it. We waited for almost a year but in the end it was ruled unconstitutional. Most organizations did sign it.*

Philip: AMI was phasing out its funding for organizations in 1990 in order to focus on individual artists and advocacy. In addition to funding Visual Aids, we also gave a fellowship to Joy Silverman to create the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression.

Cee: *The National Campaign for Freedom of Expression started in order to disseminate information to make the arts community aware that something had to be done. Joy Silverman, Charlotte Murphy, Ann Folkes, and I launched NCFE when we went down to Washington to have the first press conference. We basically just made it up on the train!*

David: *As you can probably figure out, there was both a tight and loose network of people in the national community who worked together on NCFE. I was involved in the development of the Campaign after Joy Silverman received her AMI fellowship to create the organization, and hired Alex Grey to help. I became the first executive director in '91. The first money for NCFE was from AMI, then the Warhol Foundation, then the Unitarian Universalists. Subsequently, we were able to get money from the Nathan Cummings Foundation and the Robert Sterling Clark Foundation, and they are funders to this day. Very few foundations would touch it. Foundations are inherently conservative institutions, regardless of the programs they support. Funding Lincoln Center does not mean that you're going to be thrilled about Mapplethorpe or Finley. When I took over the job of director at NCFE, funders told me, "My board won't agree to fund the Campaign. It's too political."*

Cee: *We did little zaps, like when Ana Imelda Radice was speaking at the Metropolitan Museum. We all came as invited guests and while people were milling around before it started, we spread pamphlets on all the chairs denouncing Radice for her activities in the NEA. They were unrolling a videotape with Walter Cronkite about the arts in America—all watercolors and crafts. We needed a big campaign to save the Endowment, but dance companies weren't getting involved because censorship is not their issue, and museums weren't getting involved. We wanted to say, "Yes, this is your issue. This is all of our issue, whether it affects you directly at this moment is not the point. The point is that if government gets into deciding what gets seen and heard, that's a problem."*

PY: *Part of our interest in creating NCFE was to have more than only the Metropolitan Museum lobbying in Washington.*

David: *When we started NCFE, I pointed out that it was called the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression, "campaign" meaning something you put forward, achieve, finish, and then you go back to your business. Now we're in our eighth year. It's a long-term haul that's gotten worse, not better. You had the elimination of individual artist's fellowships and a reduction of the budget of the NEA, you have a chill factor in the cultural community about content, you have a rise of censorship at the local level where people want art removed because it offends their sensibility. The PR battle was won by those who created the sound-byte terms of pornographic-artists-subsidized-by-taxpayer-dollars, artists who rub chocolate on their bare breasts, the elitist arts crowd wanting us to fund their depraved art, political correctness driving all the decision at the NEA, multiculturalism as a negative thing. All of these PR messages have successfully been implanted in the general public psyche. Now we're in a defensive mode.*

David: *The concept of censorship is related primarily to the First Amendment, and that means government censorship. The Campaign was initially begun because of that kind of censorship. However, particularly with regard to public policy work, we can't ignore economic censorship, funding censorship. There are people who will say you can't call that censorship. That's their opinion. But very often what we're talking about is really economic censorship: if you don't fund the whole range of cultural work, whether it's based on community or ethnicity or whatever, that is a form of censorship. If you decide to cut the budgets for community organizations and increase the budgets for major institutions, that has an impact. In trying to influence NEA funding policies, our purpose was often to show how those policies might have an economic censorship impact, as opposed to only focusing on requirements that grants meet standards of "decency."*

Lowery: *I think that every artist and curator should be able to get a grant to work without having to worry about financials once or twice in their careers. I also think, however, that the NEA gave a false sense of entitlement to artists. A lot of people took the situation for granted and confused censorship issues with entitlement. I can't think of another period in history when money was so available to artists by peer review, unobstructed by responsibility to donors. Artists need to be conscious that having the freedom to do their work is a rare thing, a privilege that should be cherished but not expected as a natural given right. There is an air of ingratitude on the part of artists who receive grants. I tried to say to people, "You're not censored, you just might not get funding." Censorship in China means you cannot do your art. You're suppressed and put in jail. There's a big difference. Andres Serrano may not get grants, but he's not stopped from doing his art.*

David: *There was a naive view that we were all in it together as the arts community. When the opposition realized that the big boys weren't going to march to the front lines, that they were going to leave the battle to puny organizations like NCFE, Creative Time, AMI, and some others, they could see that it wasn't going to be such a difficult fight. Divide and conquer. Those big guns had corporate leaders on their boards who often supported the people we were doing battle with. But their impulse was to cut the losses and take a conservative course. They circled the wagons around what could be protected—i.e., support for major institutions—and let gay and lesbian artists and artists who were working with controversial subject matter be the sacrificial lambs. Or artists period. Get rid of the fellowship programs. The fact is, there are a great many different "beliefs"—as in racism and sexism and homophobia and classism—that all exist in the arts community just as they do in the larger society. We're not free of it.*

Philip: *I would rather have seen the NEA go gloriously down the tubes than have the capitulation that occurred. I remember the world before government funding, and openly admit that funding had a tremendous effect for good. But if it can no longer operate independently, I would rather that it was over than just do ballet. Who gives a shit?*

Marianne: *When Jane Alexander replaced Frohnmayer, AMI organized a meeting with her and the heads of a number of foundations. It was a, "Well, What Are You Going To Do Jane?" kind of meeting. She got up and spoke in a very flat, soft voice, and said, "My hands are tied. What are you going to do?" It was chilling because I was sitting around the table with a bunch of people who probably weren't going to do anything.*

Philip: *Relatively few people will forgive certain administrators of certain artist spaces for siding with the NEA. A lot of people had gotten used to their power by that point. When there was a lot of money and good times in the '80s, they were generous and open. When it became clear that their jobs were in jeopardy because of limitations on funding, people got chicken-shit and their defense of artists became very superficial. I remember a meeting with the heads of most of the credible arts spaces in the country where I brought up the work of Annie Sprinkle. I said, "I want you to tell me why what she does is art." Not one of those people could say why it's art, and about half of them said it isn't. I said, "You guys are fucked. How can you even think about advocating for public funding when you can't get it together amongst yourselves to defend what at least some of you are presenting, much less discuss it, much less try to make other people understand it." That was a moment of real crisis for me. Karen Finley put it really well once. It was before the NEA crisis. She was performing at a NAAO meeting and she began as Karen instead of as a character, and she said, "It's just amazing to be here and have all you people who turned down my requests and rejected me sitting in the audience." And then, typical Karen, she switched and said, "You're the soul of the art world." To which one could have added, "Such as it is." If there was a soul in the art world. These were the people who were doing their best. And compared to the curators at the Modern, they were saints. But they were people with personal ambition who had become security-conscious and at that point sold out the artists. Many of them had been selling artists out for years without being called on it, but when things got tough it became very clear.*

MB: *You get pretty damn passionate when you know you're one of the last organizations out there willing to say, "It's important to give artists and their visions a chance."*

Philip: *Issues of sexuality or gender or politics or gay and lesbian concerns all became red flags to people who had any turf to protect. And the foundation world is about turf protection and the maintenance of power within a certain framework more than it is about generosity or changing the world.*

Laurence: *The politicians continue to bash artists. I doubt we'll see an end to that soon. What worries me more is the lack of leadership from the large foundations.*

Philip: *The NEA probably got in trouble because it was taking the high road. And with the arrogance that's typical of the art world, not keeping people informed. Art is already outside the American value system. But that has been compounded by the art world's elitism and its unwillingness to address the fact that artists, for quite a long time, have made stuff that outdistances people's understandings, walling off people from art, and creating a speciality that wasn't part of cultural expression in the more general sense. That shifted in the late '80s, but by that time it was too late. It already created the sense that artists operate in an arena that doesn't matter and that giving money to artists is simply encouraging self-indulgence. You just don't know what you're going to get. It may not be much. It may not be comprehensible. And it may not be pretty.*

Mary: *Many Americans see art as decoration, as peripheral, or as elitist. Well, it is elitist in a way because not everybody's willing to engage it. It takes a certain amount of openness.*

Laura: *You either get it or you don't. If you deprive a human being of the opportunity to be involved with art, something higher, creativity, you're really depriving the human being of being. If you don't give the human organism mystery and visual beauty, if you don't give it even controversy and something to struggle with, the mind just shuts down, goes blank. I just can't imagine a world without art. . . . but see over there, out in the street, there're a lot of people who don't have it.*

Lowery: *Elitism is something that any organization can slip into. The irony is that the issues artists are dealing with are so germane to that public.*

Cec: *Not all artists can be all things to all people, nor should they be. I think the public has the ability to choose. However, I don't think that an artist should be denied public support because he or she doesn't reach out to every member of the public. Just because I don't want my three cents going to that, it doesn't mean that it shouldn't be supported by the public sector of which my three cents is part. It's a question of democracy.*

David: *Our argument is that not everything should be funded, but through the system of peer panels and quality decisions, every viewpoint, every kind of culture has a right to have some support. The other argument that one hears more and more today is quite the reverse. It's saying, "If I don't like something, it shouldn't get any support."*

Kathy: *If it's public money, and part of it is my money, I also want to have some say about how it's spent. The public may feel that way, but I am part of the public. When the NEA decides that it's not going to give problematic grants, that's my tax money, too, and I want to see that risk-taking art. And why are you denying that to me? Because you might get in trouble with your right-wing constituency. But I'm part of your constituency, too. Gays and lesbians are part of your constituency, Latinos are part of your constituency. We want to see the art that reflects our existence. Yes, public money has to be accountable to the public, but I am the public.*

David: *I do think that artists have responsibilities, but I will trust the artist to let me know what those responsibilities are. I don't think a society or a funder should say it's your responsibility as an artist to do x, y, and z. Each artist I've talked to about this topic has a very good answer—a thought-out, intelligent, valid response—to the question of their responsibilities. But it's always different. In many circles these days, that's a very radical notion.*

Cec: *All art-making is political. Being an artist is a political statement even if you are a studio artist that works on your own in the quiet of the night. The fact is that in this country, in this age, being an artist says something particular to the general population, to Congress. Therefore, by default, making art makes you political. To any artist that says the NEA debacle is not my issue because I am an abstract painter, I'd say, "That's bullshit." Down the line, who's going to say you can't paint with blue? It gets just that ridiculous.*

Chapter 5:

"I don't see a lot of altruism."

Marianne: All private foundations involved with art realized that what was happening with the NEA was going to impact their constituencies.

Marianne: Before Laura left, she provided an initial \$2 million for an endowment for AMI. But as the NEA started to go by the wayside, we weren't able to give away nearly as much money as we wanted to. It took about a year before we started getting more and more applications.

Philip: If we had stopped funding for four or five years our endowment would have grown, but artists did not want us to do that. We needed to try something drastic to continue to fund people in a time of greatly diminished resources available to artists.

Linda: Giving out twenty teeny grants a year was beneficial to twenty people, but we had an opportunity to do more: to create a model that would have a broader effect.

Linda: The old models of fundraising were not working. It looked like the NEA was going to be dismantled. Artists were under attack. There was no longer a consensus on supporting artists with public funds. Foundations were getting busy with other agendas and almost none were supporting artists directly. There didn't seem to be any models of support that were not either tied to the whims of foundations or politics.

Laurence: So we set about trying to figure out how we were going to raise more money to give away to artists. We looked at lots of different options.

Marianne: The Arts Forward Fund was our formal response to the NEA crisis.

Cee: Running AFF, like giving office space to Creative Time, Visual AIDS, and NCFE, was a way in which AMI practiced what it preached, finding ways a foundation can actually do something that benefits the community without its necessarily requiring a lot of money.

Marianne: AFF aimed to bring together funders to form a pool of money that would be given away by peers in the field to replace, ideally, the funds that the NEA had cut. It never got close to that. We then went from trying to raise big money from foundations and individuals to trying to raise little money through direct mail. And that finally led to the idea of trying to generate big money of our own with a mail-order catalogue of artist-produced products.

Mary: Our vision was of lots of people supporting the arts through purchases and small donations.

Linda: We had as much intellectual interest in a new model as practical interest in generating new income. The catalogue was a way of creating a model that was impervious to the political environment and, at the same time, educated people about artists and how art is part of one's life.

Marianne: We tried vigorously to strike a balance between art and commerce. The intention was not to support artists who create merchandise, so much as to make money that we could then give to artists who weren't in the marketplace. The catalogue was conceived of as a money-making effort, but the educational component did have much more impact than I expected with people from all over the country. Not just, "I can't get my hands on anything like this out in Texas," but also, "I never knew that artists made things like this."

Linda: At a time when artists were being demonized and the process of making art devalued, when artists were represented as wild people nobody knew and nobody cared about, it was about saying, "Whether you know it or not, an artist's sensibility is in your home."

David: We went through an enormous amount of thought, discussion, debate, and research before we decided to do the catalogue. We were spending almost the entire endowment of the foundation. We mailed out about 1.5 million catalogues and had \$1.2 million in sales the first year. We won awards for catalogue design and direct marketing. It was a viable business. But like many small start-up businesses, we were undercapitalized. And we couldn't get the capital we needed. Foundations considered it too risky and wouldn't get involved. Banks strung us along. We missed a season, and it was over. There was so much lip service being paid in that era to isn't-it-horrible-that-Congress-has-eliminated-support-for-individual-artists, and here was an organization with a great history coming forward with a viable option and people just wouldn't touch it. It was one of the most painful things I've ever gone through.

Adam: The foundation community had been talking up entrepreneurialism. Yet when we went to those foundations with an entrepreneurial effort that had a successful, one-year track record, we got zero back. Nothing. We couldn't even get a loan. We couldn't even get a Program-Related Investment. Foundations don't know what they're talking about when it comes to being entrepreneurial. You can't say, be entrepreneurial, and then give a \$25,000 grant. You have to be ready to underwrite a business for three to five years at a level that's going to be adequate.

Phillip: The idea that the art world should follow the entrepreneurial model to solve its problems is a product of the Reagan era.

Lowery: There continue to be challenges to the tax deductibility of merchandising by non-profits. It's a dicey situation, particularly when you get to the Metropolitan, which has such a prominent merchandising program. But the relationship between nonprofit and for-profit has always been extremely fluid in this country. The reality for any nonprofit organization at this point is, if you don't have a patron with deep, deep pockets, you're going to have to figure out how to run your organization more like a business and to generate funds to support its activities.

Linda: While the point of the Reagan-Bush era was to decentralize services from government to nonprofits, they were in fact making it harder to get nonprofit status.

Adam: The arts are not going to be self-sustaining. A museum bookstore can't pay the way. How is a stressed-out theater company supposed to manage a restaurant?

Linda: Nonprofits are undercapitalized in terms of human resources. Community-based organizations and organizations of color are undercapitalized generally, and even the businesses in their communities are undercapitalized. If you live in a red-lined neighborhood in Brooklyn where there are no banks and the small businesses are under siege, what kind of business model does a nonprofit dream up?

David: I rather doubt that art that has a value to our culture and society and our lives is going to survive from entrepreneurial effort. What's happening in this country is that the right-wing voices have been so loud for the last decade that we're starting to sound like them. We are doing what they've told us to do, whether we realize it or not. We are thinking that the bottom line should be profit-making. If you want to make art, you should be entrepreneurial. The bottom line is the marketplace. If something is worth its salt, it will support itself. Art and culture don't always function that way in our society. It's unlikely that important intellectual and aesthetic investigation and social subject matter are going to be commercially successful. All you have to do is look at Hollywood films to see what survives in the marketplace. That's not what AMI was about and that's not what I'm interested in as a cultural activist.

Cee: David and I were looking at a book about WPA art, and the resemblance between what happened to the WPA and to the NEA is remarkable. The WPA was abolished by the government when artists became involved with political content. This is not the first time this has happened, and it probably won't be the last time. If there is going to be any support for the arts other than earned income, it's probably going to have to come from private or corporate philanthropy.

Adam: AMI also, like a lot of other organizations in the '80s, turned to the philanthropic community for support—including the corporate philanthropic community.

Cee: The corporate funding AMI got was nominal: \$3,000 from Chase. I don't even remember how much we got from Philip Morris.

David: Was there an ethical question? Any time Philip Morris is on the table as a funder, it doesn't go without mention; but money is money and all money has its taint, whether it's from the Rockefellers or anywhere else. It's just gone through more or less laundering.

Gai: I would rather see somebody in an entrepreneurial position making money for their own organization than taking it from Philip Morris.

Bruce: Artwork that cannot be used to promote or advertise the products and activities of corporations does not get corporate funding. The whole world has taken a turn toward the market to the point where there is very little so-called independent work being made, particularly in film and video. I believe that there are cycles. At some time public funding will come back and there'll be another flowering of interest in experimentation and support for work that somehow alters the existing reality, the existing language.

Lowery: With the NEA, the government made it okay to fund the arts in a way that brought others onboard, certainly corporations. But government funding is always going to be slightly politicized.

Mary: Public funding is subject to political whims. Government agencies are forced to think about being responsible to the public. What does the public want? The public doesn't know what it wants. It's unimaginable to have a government that doesn't support the arts, but the truth is, the U.S. government was never really that involved. Of course, there have always been military bands, which now get more from the government than the entire NEA.

Marianne: Even if public funding were still intact, it seems to me that there are sectors of society and branches of culture that are never going to appeal to a broad-enough public to be seen as deserving public support. The advantage of private foundations is that they can direct money to specialized or marginalized constituencies.

Mary: Private foundations have the freedom to establish, within legal boundaries, what they want to do with their money. That allows for a freedom of choice that's important in this country.

Laura: I really hope that the private sector can play a role that the public sector can't. Isn't that what this is about?

Adam: Even though private philanthropy is a multi-billion dollar industry, it pales in comparison to public support. To think that private philanthropy can fill the vacuum of public support, be it for education, health, or the arts, is absolutely catastrophic in its implications. There's just not enough money.

Laura: There's a lot of money running around this country. Sometimes I wish people would just get off it and fund the arts. But right now there is also a huge social challenge that looks more compelling than the making of art. People are going to put their funds into social programs until they understand that there is no such thing as an isolated social challenge. Slowly, people will begin to understand the relationship between a homeless person and forms of expression.

Lowery: I just got a study which argues for increasing state support of the arts by showing that the arts are a high-return, low-risk investment. For example, the Met, just by itself, attracts more spectators per year than all the sports events in the tri-state area combined. I don't know if that includes Little League. We do an analysis of how many people come, and project how many hotel rooms are booked, restaurant meals eaten, and how much shopping done, and we prove that the arts pump billions of dollars into the local economy. And we still can't get a fair share of support. The government subsidizes the auto industry and the tobacco industry. Here is an industry that would probably require a minimal amount of money, but people still can't get it. If there were no art in New York, I'm not sure why anybody in their right mind would come.

Kathy: Support for the arts has got to come from somewhere. I would prefer to have it come from government. But when governmental funding for the arts is crashing down around our ears, it's hard to define what an adequate response from the foundation community would be.

Mary: Public funding is subject to political whims. But private funding is subject to the whims of private people. We've also seen that happen over and over again.

Philip: Foundation funding sucks, corporate funding sucks, public funding sucks: they all suck.

Marianne: There are kinds of expertise that aren't widely shared by people in the government or by foundation trustees. That's a problem, because then other kinds of economies and values come into play. But many private foundations, to their credit, do invite people from the field to participate. Given that, I would say that private foundations aren't any more or less corrupt than public funding has been.

Bruce: The best thing about private foundations is their freedom from government restrictions and their potential to be activist. But most foundations are reactionary. They're founded by conservative people looking for a tax write-off, or out of vanity, to boost their social position. They're in it for their own power and glory. It's a whole world view. Investment. Promotion. They have a standing in the community. They belong to the Rotary Club. They don't want to ruffle feathers. They're not going to stick their neck out for Bob Flanagan or Karen Finley.

Marianne: We did try to find another major donor for AMI but there wasn't enough kick-back. AMI wouldn't provide cachet for an individual. It was too democratic. When we talked about bringing money people on it was abundantly clear that the most important thing was not to change the structure of the organization.

Laurence: All of us had come out of institutions where money-boards often consumed more energy than they were worth.

Laura: I came out of a philanthropic past. My family has a printing business in Chicago. It's very big, but very Midwestern. I came from that culture. You give back. My father was very forward-thinking and very, very generous. He told a story about his grandmother sitting him down and telling him, "This has all been given to you by God and God expects you—you have a duty—to provide for others."

David: The "thousand points of light" we've been hearing about for the past decade is really about advocating for a return to the pre-1960 model. It's the re-privatization of American society. The result would be support for the things that rich people like. Which is not to say that some people with money wouldn't want to support diversity, but by and large not.

Bruce: Foundations are the product of the trickle-down theory of the turn of the century. It's just like Reaganomics. What a nightmare. What kind of theory is that? If the rich get richer they give more to the poor? It's never going to happen. There's still a belief that rich people are going to support the arts, but these days it's even hard for symphonies and ballets to get support.

Laura: Private funding comes from people who have gotten to a place where they feel a sense of mission and responsibility to support what they believe in. I don't think the idea that philanthropy should take a bigger place in partnership with the public sector is a bad impulse. A lot of people are naturally discovering service. It's really just one of the highest impulses there is.

Cee: We also went to big artists and got almost zero response. We found out that many artists who've made it are just not very generous. Mapplethorpe wasn't. The same with Warhol. They wouldn't have started foundations while they were alive.

Laurence: The only exceptions were Roy and Dorothy Lichtenstein and Jenny Holzer. The others had an almost capitalist attitude: "I had to pay my dues, I struggled and did it and I'm not going to help anybody." That's a sensibility this country suffers from.

Lowery: *The brilliance of the tax code was in creating an artful alliance between public good and private wealth. A lot of foundations have been put together by people who really cared. Other people are just dodging taxes. That's what makes this country great.*

Laurence: We also considered the traditional put-together-a-national-committee-with-Bianca-Jagger-and-have-a-party-at-Barney's, etc. None of us wanted to pay the price that it took to do that.

Laura: *I personally don't think that the public sector is going to get downsized that much. At the same time, the nonprofit sector is going to expand because there's more and more money. The number of foundations is growing like crazy because people don't want to give their money to the government. They're finding that foundations are a great way to keep their money out of that system.*

Laurence: You have to be extraordinarily wealthy for a foundation to make sense in terms of taxes.

Mary: *I'm not a Marxist and I don't think all should be equal to all people. We should have basic healthcare, etc., but there should be incentives and money is the biggest incentive. It's important to create opportunities for people who make money to do something good with it.*

Philip: *It's not clear that many arts foundation are anything more than tax shelters for collections.*

Linda: *Should foundations exist? I'm a socialist. I don't think anyone should have that kind of money.*

Adam: *Foundations started early in this century in the United States. They became an area for some terrible tax abuse. In 1967 an investigation was initiated by Congress which led to the tax codes for foundations being rewritten in 1969. Basically, when you establish a foundation, in exchange for paying a nominal tax on your investments, you have to annually give away a minimum of 5 percent of your accumulated assets. Minimum. That includes all program-related costs, not just grants. The rest can be added to the corpus. Five percent is not much, especially considering how the stock market has performed since 1969, and I would venture that 95 percent of foundations operate at that 5 percent level. In return, you can manage the money as a public trust. It's literally no longer your money, but public money that you can invest for charitable work. You're simply overseeing it. People forget that.*

David: *I've heard arguments in recent years that foundations should be held more accountable to the public.*

Adam: *But if the majority of Americans support getting rid of the NEA, do we really want private foundations to be more accountable to the public? Do we want to open up that can of worms? Or, are we better off slowly trying to move forward the agenda of those exceptions, those Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundations and Warhol Foundations. . . .*

Kathy: When AMI started to raise money from other foundations, we knew it would be problematic, but that was why we went. We were hoping that foundations would open not only their doors, but also their heads; and would realize that in a time of crisis it might be necessary for them to take risks. Different foundations reacted differently, certainly some of them weren't very favorable.

Laurence: We tried to raise money from other foundations that are concerned about individual artists, but didn't have the mechanisms to fund them. We discovered that not very many foundations are concerned about individual artists. They may care about the arts, but that's vastly different than caring about artists.

David: How can I justify to my board giving money to AMI to fund Bob Flanagan? I'm sure those discussions happened somewhere at some point.

Laurence: *Most large foundations have drawn the parameters around themselves so tightly that it's very hard for them to fund outside the plan, whatever the plan is.*

Adam: *Many foundations do play a catalytic and questioning role, but I would like to see the foundation community be a little more reflective of the society it serves. Are foundations really responding to the needs of the community or the just internal needs of their organization? My feeling is that the majority of foundations serve the needs of their organizations first and the needs of their so-called constituencies second. I don't see a lot of altruism.*

Philip: *The best people in the foundation world are afraid of their power and the worst are just interested in protecting it. They're not about to give up the perks that come with the job, so anything that threatens their position is out of the question.*

Adam: *As long as foundation boards are only made up of a certain social order, foundations will remain as they are. If you want change, it should be mandated that foundations that support the arts must have a certain number of artists on the board. Foundations involved with education must have educators. But there's no chance of that kind of change. None. The mood of the country right now is less government intrusion.*

Philip: *It's about power.*

Adam: *Yeah, and once this gets published, I'll be. . . . I have a four-year old. Keep that in mind.*