

ARTISTS COUNT

IN ST. LOUIS

REGIONAL ARTS COMMISSION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Artists Count is an initiative of the Regional Arts Commission of St. Louis



REGIONAL ARTS
COMMISSION
OF ST. LOUIS

Special thanks to The Kresge Foundation for
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THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

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A Summary Of Key Findings And Recommendations From The 2012 Artists Count Survey

In the winter of 2011, the Center for the Study of Art & Community was asked by the St. Louis Regional Arts Commission (RAC) to help them in their efforts to learn more about the structure and dynamics of the artist ecosystems in St. Louis City and County. As a part of this initiative funded by The Kresge Foundation, RAC, the Center, and artists and community advisors jointly developed a seven-part survey designed to give artists an opportunity to reflect on and share the environment, conditions, and motivations that affect their work. This research initiative, dubbed Artists Count, coincided with the completion of the Commission's 2012 Strategic Plan, which identified support for artists as a major priority.

The research design was informed by two core assumptions related to community cultural development. The first, the concept of the "cultural ecosystem," views artists, arts organizations, audiences, funders, etc., as parts of a system whose interdependent mechanisms are best understood when considered as a whole. Our second foundational premise is that cultural ecosystems are highly dependent on the physical, economic, and creative health of the artists working within them. The survey was conducted from April through August of 2012. The invitation to participate was disseminated widely via electronic, print media and hands on distribution to solicit the participation of "anybody who considers himself or herself an artist" living in the St. Louis region. Over 3,000 artists responded.

Key Findings

St. Louis Is Ripe For Artist Driven Community Development

The Artists Count study shows that some areas of the city and county have particularly high concentrations of artists. This is important because research¹ shows that these kinds of high-density cultural assets can be a powerful stimulant for community development. The neighborhoods with particularly high concentrations of artists include:

1. *63103*: The centrally located city area bordered by Delmar Ave. on the north, Park Ave on the south, North Grand Blvd. to the west, and I-70 to the east. That includes parts of Downtown and Midtown. The response rate for this zip code was nearly four times the average for the entire cohort.
2. *63117*: The city of Richmond Heights.
3. *63143*: The Maplewood area bordered by I-64 to the north, Marshall Ave. to the south, South Hanley Rd. on the west, and I-44 to the east.
4. *63118*: The area bisected by Cherokee Street and bordered by Russell Blvd. to the north, Meramec St. on the south, South Grand Ave. to the west, and the Mississippi River to the east. This includes Tower Grove East, Benton Park and Cherokee neighborhoods.

Another way of looking at concentrations of artistic activity is to consider larger, contiguous areas with large numbers of artists responding to the survey. In the city of St. Louis, the eight zip codes² comprising most of the southern half of the city produced 33% of the total survey responses and 79% of all of the city's responses. Outside of the city, the two contiguous areas represented by zip codes 63119 (Webster Groves) and 63122 (Kirkwood) are home to 12.5% of

¹ Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania

² The eight contiguous zip codes comprising this area are 63103, 63104, 63108, 63109, 63110, 63118, and 63139.

the surveyed artists. These locally dense artist communities can be a powerful asset for community development in the St. Louis region.

Creative Process Is The Driving Force For Artists' Work

Nearly 90% of the artists queried said that involvement with the creative process itself was the prime motivation for their continued commitment to art-making. While descriptions and definitions of the “creative process” varied widely, most contained aspects of the following:

1. Exploration: discovery through experimentation and invention
2. Innovation: developing something new from existing materials or patterns
3. Synthesis: putting unique ideas/concepts/sounds together
4. Translating: crafting creative ideas into something meaningful to others

These findings were consistent across all disciplines, ages, genders, and racial/ethnic groups.

STL Artists' Incomes Are Low But Consistent With The Region

In terms of earning capacity, nearly 46% of the surveyed artists indicate that they are making less than \$25K per year and 31.6% report they are earning \$25K–\$50K from both artistic and non-artistic income sources. The data on household incomes show that 23.4% of the respondents come from households earning less than \$25K annually. This is just above the U.S. poverty level for a family of four but it is below the median household incomes in the region with St. Louis City at \$33,652 and St. Louis County at \$55,290. The largest group (54 %) is composed of those with household incomes above \$50K, with nearly two-thirds of those earning above \$75K.

Given these statistics, it is not surprising that many artists tend to locate in lower income neighborhoods. For the 10 zip code areas that produced 53% of our survey responses the average household income is \$37K (compared to \$55,290 for the county and \$33,652 for the city). This pattern is more pronounced for the 10 zip codes where 90% of the city-dwelling respondents live, which have an average household income of \$28,305.

Sources of Artist Income

Artistic work	21%
Arts-related work	22%
Non-arts-related work	36%
Retirement income	10%
Other income	11%

Art Making Alone Does Not Sustain Most of the STL Artists

Fully 79% of the respondents indicated that they derive income from multiple sources—art making, teaching, other employment, family support, etc. As one commented, “I’ve put together many things to make things work.” This finding echoes those of other studies³ that have documented the uniquely eclectic nature of artists’ economies in other U.S. communities. The fact that the majority of these economic puzzle pieces (43%) are arts-related (i.e., art making, teaching, and arts administration) is also worthy of note.

3. Seifert and Stern, *From Creative Economy to Creative Society* (SIAP, University of Pennsylvania: 2007); Rosario-Jackson, Maria et al., *Investing in Creativity: A Study of the Support Structure for U.S. Artists* (Urban Institute: 2003); “Report on Healthcare Needs of Washington State Artists” (Artist Trust, Seattle: 2008).

It is not a compromise if we get inventive about how to sustain ourselves.

—Musician

This diversity of income sources also points to another theme that emerged through multiple questions in this survey. A number of artists indicated that the “stitched-together” nature of their livelihoods made both their art making and everyday lives fairly unpredictable. Understandably, this condition has been exacerbated further by the economic downturn.

Teaching Is A Significant Source Of Support For STL Artists

Nearly 65% of the artists responding indicated that they earned a portion of their living in the past year through teaching. This is consistent with other research on artists’ livelihoods. These art-teaching jobs typically include post-secondary teaching, K–12 instruction, and work in community settings. This finding shows that there is a fairly robust market for teaching artists in both formal and informal educational settings. Although many expressed a desire for a career centered on making art alone, most described their teaching as reasonably compatible with their creative efforts. Very few indicated that they did not like teaching per se but resented having to depend on teaching to make ends meet.

Some STL Artists Lack Access To Health Care

Although a substantial majority of respondents (80%) indicated that they have health insurance, 30% of those surveyed also indicated that access to health care was a significant issue for them. Some indicated that health benefits were a major impetus for securing and remaining in outside jobs. This suggests that finding ways to increase access to health care (and other public benefits) continues to be an important issue for artists. Other research indicates that a majority of working artists cannot afford to pay for their own health insurance and depend on spouses or outside jobs for coverage.⁴

The artists I work with and employ are like my family. Sometimes the family grows big, and sometimes it’s quite small. Hard times like these call for solo shows with no sets and costumes from the thrift store. But from time to time we have a big family reunion.

—Theater Artist

STL Artists Create Jobs

During 2011, the artists surveyed also reported hiring 4149 artists and non-artists as a part of their work. Averaged across the entire cohort, each participating artist produced 1.36 arts jobs and 0.37 non-artists jobs annually. Among the various arts disciplines those working in theater arts are much more likely to employ others.

Artists Most Value Direct Support

Artists mentioned the importance of grants, fellowships, and commissions as helping to “launch” them into being full-time artists. Closer to home, a number of respondents specifically identified RAC support through funded arts organizations, technical assistance, and training as critical to the development of their careers. Some artists also reflected on what they described as “the lack of fellowship type grants in the area as a significant shortcoming.” Other critical needs cited

4. Ibid, Artist Trust.

were business and technology training; help with marketing, and opportunities to connect with other artists.

Time is like gold. It's also like quicksilver. But mostly, it's just not available.

—Writer

Time Is Money For Artists

Having the time to make artwork is the top priority for artists. Many artists mentioned time as an important part in their “best work” equation with most indicating that it was the most critical factor. This response was consistent across all disciplines. Just over 50% of the commentaries about work conditions mentioned money

as critical to their ability to find the time to produce quality work. The vast majority of these artists characterized money as “buying the time” they need to work—in all shapes and sizes. A number also correlated the amount and continuity of the time purchased with the quality of the work produced. Conversely, when money is tight, artists said that they had to take on more “outside jobs” and, thus, have less time for making art.

Families Are A Crucial Foundation For Many Artists

The importance of families represented in these artists’ responses cannot be understated here. It is clear from commentaries throughout the study that families are a primary source of creative, financial, and moral support for many of the artists represented in this survey. References to parents, spouses, partners, children, in-laws, brothers, and sisters are peppered throughout. For many of these artists, it is clear that the constancy of commitment, belief, and even sacrifice that they have received from family members has provided a crucial foundation for their work as artists.

STL Artists Are Very Industrious

One of our questions explored how artists interact with their audiences. Their responses were extraordinarily varied with most artists describing multiple avenues for creative exchange, sharing, and commerce. The responses included traditional exhibitions, performances, and publications, online venues for marketing, sales and presentations as well as informal outlets such as churches and parties. We were also delighted with the numerous responses (dubbed “other”) like “dog shows,” “awards banquets,” and “pecha kuchas” that were not so easily categorized.

The most noteworthy pattern to emerge is the layered nature of these artists’ audience relationships. Fully, 72% indicated that they use two modes of presentation, and 46% said they use three. The number reporting four (25%) and five (12%) venues was particularly interesting. Predictably, exhibitions and performances of various types comprise the lion’s share (43%) of these interactions.

Local Venues Are Crucial Creative Partners For STL Artists

Many of our respondents recognized that a healthy cultural ecology has both a continuum of artists at various stages of development, and a diversity of venues that offer opportunities for production and presentation in support of that development. Performing artists discussed how these venues also facilitate the transition of artwork from originating artist (e.g., composers, playwrights, choreographers, etc.) to interpreting artists (e.g., musicians, actors, dancers, etc.).

There was also an understanding that these creative spaces serve as the bridge between the creative products and local audiences looking for arts experiences. It is striking that large cultural organizations were rarely referenced as being a part of an artist’s support system. For these

artists, it is clear that most creative incubation and development takes place on the stages and in the galleries of the region’s many small and mid-sized arts organizations.

St. Louis Is A Hot Spot For Creative Placemaking And Cross-Sector Collaborations

An increasing number of artists and arts organizations across the country are working with local partners from other community sectors to help build healthier and more productive communities. For the past two decades, The Regional Arts Commission has been recognized as a leader in the growing, creative placemaking movement. RAC funds arts programs across sectors and since 1997 developed the Community Arts Training (CAT) Institute, an innovative program fostering successful partnerships among artists, social workers, educators, policy makers, and community activists with the goal of creating significant arts programs in community settings.

Artists Work Across Community

Community development	27.6%
Environmental groups	11.7%
Human services	13.1%
Health	12.7%
Education	63.1%
Public safety	4.2%
Youth work	18.9%
Park/recreation	20.6%
Other	15.9%

The Artists Count survey results show that a significant number of artists have been actively working with other types of community sectors over the past year. These cross-sector relationships include collaborations between artists and education, youth work, community development, parks, social services, recreation and the like.

Technological Advances Challenge Artists To Rethink Audiences

For authors, musicians, and filmmakers, the distribution process is as important as the act of

A new area I am pursuing is the creation of storybook and game apps for mobile devices like the iPad.

—Painter

creating the art. Changes in these industries have significantly altered artists’ relationships with their audiences. As one writer observes, “the massive changes . . . in the past decade have left me in charge of much more than ever before: marketing, developing outlets, building fan bases, creating support materials and activities.” While the

process has become longer and more expensive for the artist, he or she also has more autonomy and control. Many of the responding artists described using various media and websites.

STL Artists Function Within A Complex, Multifaceted Support System

Not surprisingly, few artists rely on only one form of support. Most often, this mix of support comes from different people and institutions that artists interact with on a regular basis. (These include family, friends, artist peers and colleagues, service organizations, vendors, presenters and curators, and their venues.) Most of the artists described these elements as both interconnected and interdependent.

My neighborhood arts center is the best model of an artistic community in St. Louis. Not just because it provides a space for artistic expression, critique, and development, but because it does all of this while constantly asking, “What’s best for the sustainability of the community?” With their support over the past six years, I’ve sculpted an artistic lifestyle that I am able to sustain and that unconditionally serves the community.

—Visual Artist

Artists Are Key To Broadening And Deepening Cultural Participation

A few of our respondents observed that building new audiences within what are often described as “under resourced” communities is best facilitated through the advancement of artists working in and for those communities. The contention here is that, like political participation, community arts access and ownership is best built from the ground up on a foundation of local culture and trusted relationships. We would concur, with the caveat that this support must be consistent and predictable. To be truly effective, artists’ support must also be coupled with a sustained effort to advance the development of the cultural infrastructure (institutions, networks, training, etc.) that eventually emerge in an artist-rich environment.

Key Recommendations For Consideration From The Center For The Study Of Art And Community

1. Direct Support For Artists

Establish a fellowship award program: Merit-based fellowship programs are regarded as one of the most equitable and efficient ways to support artists in the field. We believe they are the most efficient way to support the advancement of individual artists’ careers. Most fellowship grants are awarded based on the depth and quality of an artist’s body of work, with little or no strings attached. Over time, they help to validate artists within the broader community and establish a standard of excellence among artists. They also distinguish a community as “artist friendly” which, in turn, helps to both retain and attract artists to the area.

Make sudden opportunity awards a key element of any new support strategy: One of the most consistent concerns articulated by artists is the long lead-time inherent in most grant programs. Based on this feedback, it is clear that many short-term opportunities and/or critical needs are going unmet because of a lack of quick-response capacity by funders or service providers. In response, we recommend that a quick-response fund be included in the design of the Commission’s artist support program. We would define “quick response” as a completed request and award sequence from four to six weeks for amounts in the \$1,500–\$3,000 range.

Increase support for cross-sector community cultural development: Given the increasingly cross-sector and multidisciplinary nature of contemporary art making, it might also be worthwhile to establish an interdisciplinary fellowship. It would be useful to broaden the definition of interdisciplinary work to include collaborations between artists and colleagues from other sectors such as science, community development, or even politics. Another option might be to provide a fellowship-like award for creative leadership in arts management.

Establish a Distinguished Artist Award: This type of fellowship would recognize an individual artist for artistic excellence as well as significant impact on the region’s cultural life over several

decades. We would encourage a program for artists in all disciplines that uses a nomination process. Artists who achieved their primary successes elsewhere, however, should not be eligible. No one should receive the award more than once.

2. Artist Support Services

Career development: Many of the artists in this study identified themselves directly or indirectly as being self-managed. Over the course of their careers, most artists will need to be administratively adept enough to sustain their practice. As such, we believe that the CAT Institute and the Volunteer Lawyers and Accountants for the Arts counseling and Business Edge workshops are valuable and needed services for the region’s artists. Given the obvious need, these types of services need to be significantly expanded, particularly with regard to marketing with an emphasis on increasing the understanding and use of the Internet as a primary venue for presentation and commerce.

Create a “Craig’s” list for artists: Many artists make a lot with very little by leveraging indigenous networks that connect them to the people, places, and materials they need to fulfill their artistic aims. It is not surprising that many artists in this study acknowledged his or her participation in one of these small, self-organized support systems. Given how important they are to the healthy functioning of the artist ecosystem, we feel that the Commission should explore how digital aggregation of these resources might increase their versatility, efficiency, and usefulness. The development of a “St. Louis Artist List” could provide the region’s artists with easier access to the diverse stream of creative nutrients (materials, spaces, expertise, ideas, audiences, funding, partners, initiatives, gigs, patrons, surplus, questions, etc.) they need to feed their art making, presenting, and audience development. Such a system could not only stimulate the health and proliferation of these indigenous systems but also exponentially increase their usefulness. The result would be a self-organized creative marketplace whose applications and utility would be determined by its users.

3. Community Cultural Development

Stimulate St. Louis’s naturally-occurring cultural clusters: Over the past two decades Susan Seifert and Mark Stern have been researching the effect of art and culture on neighborhood development. They have concluded that neighborhoods with very dense, highly interactive networks of artists and arts organizations produce specific benefits for those communities. These benefits include poverty reduction, population retention and growth, and increased civic participation. They also report that the presence of these creative assets produces high levels of “cross-participation” that stimulates residents’ involvement in other civic activities⁵. Considered in the light of the SIAP findings, we feel that Artists Count research can be a significant impetus for neighborhood cultural development. (In order to provide a more complete description of SIAP’s work, please see the recent paper describing the research attached to the full Artists Count report in Appendix C.)

Stimulate creative placemaking with neighborhood art houses: The study shows growing interest among artists for working with non-arts entities and communities. There is also a strong interest in artist residencies. The Pink House project, developed by Beyond Housing and the Rebuild Foundation with partial support from RAC is a neighborhood cultural center and a model

⁵ Ibid, Seifert and Stern

that offers opportunities for both. This project combines three simple but powerful cultural development strategies:

1. The re-purposing of local housing for use as a neighborhood cultural center
2. An arts animated program designed with and for the community
3. Placemaking facilitation and stewardship provided by a well-trained community artist in residence working in partnership with community members.

We feel the Pink House model has great potential as a stimulus for focused neighborhood cultural development that could be replicated in other St. Louis communities. We also see this approach as a possible jump-start for the kind of cultural synergy identified in the SIAP research described above.

There is a small, but robust, live/work housing market in the region: Nearly one third of survey respondents indicated an interest in housing where they “can both live and do their art making.” Given this, we believe that there is a moderate and growing market for the development of live/work space. This market could be even stronger in the south city neighborhoods that have both high concentration of artists and affordable housing.

Establish a periodic “state of the artist” report: We encourage RAC to consider issuing a regular “state of the artist” report in conjunction with its continuing research. A well-publicized spotlight of this kind could help establish the region’s artist ecosystems as a generative creative force in the community. The development of a public celebration of the report’s unveiling could also be an opportunity to honor exemplary artist-serving initiatives and/or leadership in the community.