

Grantee Name

MAPP International Productions

Project Title

To support a structural expansion, bringing more US artists and arts organizations into global cultural dialogue with communities on the African continent

Project Progress and Successes

MAPP International Productions and The Africa Contemporary Arts Consortium (TACAC) proposed to initiate the first expansion of our network in the United States, creating a place for U.S. performing artists and more diverse performing arts organizations. We intended to emerge from a two-year process with a plan for prudent and effective growth that brings more colleagues into our proven framework for nurturing global cultural dialogue between communities in the U.S. and on the African continent. Our report covers the period of January 1 to September 30, 2013, and activities during this time were designed to lay groundwork and build a structure for expanded membership, and to begin to identify and possibly bring on new members.

Our first membership meeting of the year, held during the January 2013 annual conference of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters in New York City, featured a brainstorming session with six guests--from a pool of 13 invited artists and organizational representatives--designed to solicit advice on how to grow our membership in ways that are functional, serve the field, and provide more opportunities for impact across geographies, expertise and types of organizations. This discussion was meant to focus on questions of who should be at the table as we planned our expansion, and what other issues or procedures we might consider in this process. While the guest attendees were very interested in what TACAC is doing, the meeting unfortunately did not produce concrete ideas or directions. It did, however, start the conversation with two organizations which have since become TACAC members: Clarice Smith Performing Art Center in College Park, Maryland, and Portland Institute for Contemporary Art in Oregon.

Our second membership meeting, in April 2013 at the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's office in New York City, incorporated a day-long discussion with 13 invited artists to explore the philosophical implications and operational realities of having U.S. artists as members of TACAC. This meeting covered a broad range of territory, as the artists shared their experiences working on the African continent as well as working across cultures and borders more generally. While this group is clearly interested and even invested in the idea and practice of cross-continental exchange with peers in Africa, the frequency of the words "conversation," "community" and "mentoring" revealed that the desire for relationships facilitated by the Consortium supersedes the desire for membership in the Consortium. The freedom to follow aesthetic impulses and imperatives takes precedence for these artists over institutional frameworks and timelines. While the contexts are different, this reaction was similar to that of the artists on the continent who have become TACAC's African Affiliates.

Based on this discussion, we identified key decision points for implementation and ideas for further investigation regarding the integration of U.S. artists into the Consortium:

1. We questioned whether enrolling U.S. artists as core members in TACAC is appropriate to the ways in which artists want to connect and to work, or whether we should develop another structure for this relationship.
2. In the immediate term, when African artists are touring in the U.S., TACAC would seek to connect them to the U.S. artists who we know are interested in working with (or even currently working in some capacity with) artists from Africa, and make an effort to build in

time for residencies and artistic exchange in order to encourage organic artist-to-artist relationships. We would also explore tapping these artists to spearhead audience development through "on the ground" activities with African artists who visit their communities, such as informal conversations, potlucks, and other intimate public gatherings.

3. Future efforts in planning U.S. artists' travel to Africa for exchange purposes may include creating opportunities for a "pod" to travel together; e.g., one or two artists with a journalist, academic or curator. Long-term and short-term stays can overlap so that some of the cohort stays on while others return home. Implementation of exchanges will proceed with a focus on process as opposed to product.

4. We will commit to embedding a documentation process as part of any exchange, and to think expansively about what forms this may take.

5. We will further investigate the idea of having one or two paid (stipend) artist fellows (U.S./or U.S. and African) to research and report on what's happening on-the-ground in the U.S. and in Africa. The artist fellow would attend TACAC meetings, helps to think through ideas, research different topics or areas to research. This would ensure that an artist's voice is always present at the table.

6. U.S. artists who travel with TACAC support should be required to give back in some way--to blog about their experiences; to share what they've learned through a web-based performance; to partner with a local presenter to share their story; or even to recommend other artists for the next trip.

7. Also for further consideration are questions of if and how U.S. artists engaged in TACAC-sponsored exchanges should mentor or teach the next generation of artists, and whether those younger artists should also be included in research travel to or residencies in Africa.

Our third membership meeting took place in September 2013 and was hosted by a new core member, the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art (PICA). This was the first membership meeting attended by Paul Brohan of Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center, and by long-time TACAC member Ken Foster in his new role as Director of the Arts Leadership Program at the USC Thornton School of Music. A substantial portion of this meeting was spent on sharing and reviewing what we had learned to date in our expansion process and in coming to an agreement on a membership structure. Further, we held the meeting to coincide with the Time Based Festival at PICA, and invited (and supported the travel of) two artists from Africa--Opiyo Okach (Nigeria) and Andréya Ouamba (Senegal)--not only to attend our meeting but to see work and meet U.S. artists at the Festival. Other invited guests were artist Keith Hennessy, who is currently engaged in an exchange with Andréya at his space in Dakar; and Jessica Robinson of CounterPULSE, a small, artist-run San Francisco organization focused on the work of emerging artists as well as socially relevant, community-based arts and culture. Opiyo spoke about his current work; Keith and Andréya spoke about the work they did together in Dakar; and Jessica made a short presentation about the work of CounterPULSE and their interest in TACAC membership.

The outcomes of this meeting included:

1. Clarifying the terms of TACAC Core Membership as (a) \$2,500 annual contribution for TACAC's management; (b) attendance at all membership meetings; (c) the commitment to participate in three projects over five years (projects can include presenting performances, hosting residencies, writing articles and other impactful activities). Core members are fully supported in their research travels on behalf of TACAC, and for travel to membership meetings.

2. Establishing an Individual Membership, designed for independent curators and producers with a substantial track record of working with African artists as well as deep connections to their community. The annual contribution will be negotiated with each individual, and TACAC will support their travel to and participation in membership meetings.

3. Deciding to create a pool of U.S. Affiliate Artist members, similar to our African Affiliate Artist members, to serve as advisors to TACAC as well as participants in exchanges and residencies both in the U.S. and in Africa. A small group from the pool will be invited to attend each membership meeting.
4. Extending invitations to join TACAC to CounterPULSE as a core member (accepted); to USC Thornton School of Music as a core member (accepted); to French Institute/Alliance Française as a core member (pending); and to Leatrice Ellzy, who represented the National Black Arts Festival in TACAC for several years, as an individual member (pending).
5. Committing to think strategically about how to maximize the geographic clusters emerging within the Consortium--e.g., in the West, Seattle Theater Group and YBCA being joined by PICA and USC; in NYC, MAPP International being joined by 651 ARTS and FIAF (making for the dynamic combination of a producer, a presenter and a festival in one place); and how to develop clusters in other regions as we move forward with expansion (e.g., Joan Frosch at University of Florida, Gainesville, is very eager to expand with presenters in the South with whom she can partner on TACAC programming). These clusters have the potential to allow each member to do more, as each member in one area could host a different activity in relation to the same visiting African artist (hosting a residency, presenting a performance, mounting a symposium, etc.).
6. Continuing the discussion on the process to be used to identify and engage artists to be Affiliate members of TACAC.
7. Connecting Opiyo Okach to a variety of U.S. performing artists at the PICA festival, several of whom he intends to follow up with regarding future residencies and artistic projects.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

The primary challenge to date has been managing expectations of the organizations and artists we have invited to the table to brainstorm about TACAC's expansion. We had to be very clear that we were inviting them to think and to plan with us as part of our larger community, and that while their participation in this process was highly valued, it did not imply a guarantee of TACAC membership. This was particularly important in regards to inviting and meeting with the artists due to the conventional power structure that exists between those making artistic work, and those funding, producing and presenting it. This situation was familiar to us from our process with African artists during the three years of exploration and planning that led to the establishment of African affiliates for TACAC. This managing of expectations continues, as we want to stay engaged with the artists who participated in our April meeting, and we have been keeping them updated on the Consortium's growth and activities, but we do not have a concrete "program" to offer them in terms of making residencies or exchanges available.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

We were somewhat surprised to learn that the process of identifying and nurturing U.S. artists as potential TACAC members is not that different from the process we went through with the artists on the continent who are now our African Affiliates. No matter where the artists live, their priorities are distinct from ours (as organizations), and their artistic work--and the opportunities to realize it--must come first. Access to resources here in the U.S. is not the same as access to resources across Africa, but artists in both places share the feeling of being on the lighter side of the scale; a feeling that has historically created mistrust between artists and organizations (whether between an Senegalese artist and a French agency or an NYC artist and a national foundation). While we have reached a point where we have identified and will pursue partnerships with a number of the interested artists we engaged with this past year, we are also more aware of the assumptions we entered this process with, and will move forward with that in mind.

We have also been surprised--and delighted--to learn about the many U.S. artists who are thinking deeply about working globally, and who are already launching projects on the African continent; some independently, some with the support of a college or university. This process has opened our eyes to the exchanges that are already taking place, leading us to ask where TACAC fits into this bigger picture.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

In May 2013, MAPP International launched the new TACAC website at www.africaartsconsortium.org.

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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