

Philly Field Conversation #4 - Notes

[Asian Arts Initiative](#) | 7.21.18

Facilitated by Daniel Park with introduction by Asian Arts Initiative and Common Field

Where is Philadelphia in the national conversation for racial and cultural equity? What are the challenges that artists and organizers of color in Philadelphia face? How can we come together, build intersectional coalitions, and advocate for a more equitable arts community? How can a national network like Common Field provide a platform and resources to amplify local work on cultural equity? Daniel Park moderates this conversation. Established in 1993 to address tensions between Black and Asian American communities, Asian Arts Initiative invites artists and organizers of color to come together for a listening session to shape an equitable vision for the April 2019 Common Field Convening and beyond.

While this will be an event of shared thinking and wisdom, this is a POC centered space. Allies are welcome and asked to listen.

Common Field and the Philly Field Conversations Series:

[Common Field](#) is a national network of independent visual arts organizations and organizers that connects, supports, and advocates for the artist-centered field. Philly Field Conversations was initiated by Common Field to engage with the core concerns of the local arts landscape. The series has been developed through partnership with local arts leaders: [Taller Puertorriqueño](#), [Philadelphia Contemporary](#), [Asian Arts Initiative](#), and [Ulises](#). Through these gatherings, Common Field aims to articulate and activate a local network of arts organizers that will inform both the themes and programs for the [Common Field 2019 Convening](#) in Philadelphia, and the goals for local arts organizing ahead.

NOTES:

Introduction from Carol Zou, Director of Programs at Asian Arts Initiative

- What does coalition building between artists of color look like? Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) was founded in 1993 as part vision to see what Black and Asian solidarity could look like post-Rodney King.

What is the state of racial equity, particularly in cultural institutions, in Philadelphia?

- It's a disaster. Institutionally, white people have total control. What white people fail to realize is that they have blind spots. Currently their art is basically shit. That is because when you have total control from one demographic, only one worldview is expressed. The blind spots prevent alternative missions from coming to fruition. White people have total control and they fail to realize that by having it, they are harming themselves as well as everybody else.

- Because white hierarchy gives institutions money, they want to preserve that. They care about European art. They don't recognize jazz or African American art. Institutions say funders won't give money to Black and local art. I'm a [Pew fellow](#) but, I'm seen as an emerging artist. When you're an artist of color you're always seen as an emerging artist, until you die. White people see work by Black artist and think it's "Black art." When I show white people in my images they believe it's hostile. Comments that artists of color make are seen in a different light. People think only white males produce art that is for everybody. If I make work, it must be a piece of Black protest art. Same with women and trans artists. People continue to take your art with a bunch of preconceptions. I believe in unity and diversity and multicultural shows.

How does institutional leadership and employment play a role in sustaining racial inequality?

- Look at the institutions and their lack of diversity. When you go to the websites and so many images have Black faces but when you look at the staff, who is getting paid, it's nothing but white faces.
- Those who are directors and leaders, they groom those from within. While there's a couple of major funders who have started paying attention, we need more funders and supporters to demand that diversity is a requirement. However, funding opens another can of worms about equity though.
- This is a great community conversation but, we don't have representation from Pew or [William Penn](#). There's always labor coming to them instead of them coming out.

Where are the shortcomings in museum representation?

- I serve on a committee at the [PMA](#). I've been on it for six years and we recently developed [curatorial fellowship of diversity](#). It was about shifting who was employed. It felt like a victory but, it took a long time to get funding. The PMA had two exhibitions, [Represent: 200 years of African American Art](#), and [Creative Africa](#). For the first show, we got a lot of pushback because it wasn't in the central in the galleries. Even though it had good intentions, it almost added insult to injury. Flash forward to the *Creative Africa* show and in a conversation a curator revealed something like only 5% of the artists the PMA has shown were artists of color. I've been on this committee for six years but it seems like amidst of our political environment we should make more strides forward. That's not happening.
- I'm Black, I'm 75, and I'm outstanding. I have lived within walking distance of the PMA almost my whole life. I live around the corner from [PAFA](#). I have no entrance into any of those institutions and never have.
- I have brought that up in the meetings. I'm among the generation that are contemporary artists in Philly but can't get work on their walls. We gotta create a space for folks from Philly who are artists and have been here so long.
- Institutions instead make diversity groups so if someone complains they can point to it and say, "Look what we're doing!"
- How much is change possible in larger institutions? How does the flow of money affect that? If the money isn't there to support that, what happens?

- We need to have art in schools. Artist should have no problem getting jobs in elementary schools. If minority children don't have art you're taking away their speech. The political situation we have right now is because of a lack of arts and education.
- When we're talking about Philly, look at education institutions as well and how they do or don't engage with the community.
- This makes me think of how people see AAI as an institution and an anchor. We need to continue to invest in smaller anchor institutions. It's places like us that start ups or collectives can find a home because funders are not willing to fund them. It's important to invest and support places like us because then we can be a home, place, and resources for younger artists and organizations

Is there a national issue of large institutions refusing to recognize local artists?

- Community-based art is where it's at to get basic recognition. I worked with many groups and that's where stability comes from. Young artists when you're still in school, get in a neighborhood, become a collective, get involved otherwise you're just floating around. We're not really individualizes, that's an American lie. We need to have a group or a team. We're part of one big organism and we need to see ourselves like that. Art institutions should be directly involved with elementary school sending artists back and forth.
- On the national level it's the same paradigm, total white control.
- It goes back to intuitions. When I moved to Philly in 2009 I was so impressed with the murals. Now they all kinda look alike because it's the same person running it for 30 years. But as bad its it is here, [the Brooklyn Museum hired a white women to head the African Art collection](#). How does that happen?
- I've observed if you come from an internationally renowned institution then you have hiring potential in other cities. Community-based education and arts, in those jobs like recognizes like. If you go to another grassroots organization then you have an opportunity but it doesn't seem to work in reverse. Philly is a booming city for the arts but, there's a problem with employment.

Are we better off working outside of larger institutions?

- I'm always caught between are we trying to access institutions or are we building our own institutions knowing they won't ever grow to the size of the PMA and the [Barnes?](#)
- Since I pay taxes and since my relatives have died in every war this country fought, this is the world I know and this is my battleground because I'm an American citizen. It's supposed to freedom and justice for all and equal opportunity. It's their institutional money and the government has an obligation to be equitable.

What is the importance of intersectionality and solidarity among people of color?

- Philly has a lot of Latinx representation. When I go to intersectional events there is a lack of those faces. We struggle to have solidarity in inter-ethnic community. I struggle with the idea that there needs to be solidarity to be with because ideally we shouldn't need to band under the banner of "people of color." However we have to because of white oppression.

- There was a time in the 50s and 60s when all kinds of people worked together. POC or whatever you want to call it, white people don't think you're white. The reality of this situation is that we're all trained to look at each other in terms of color and ethnicity. I believe art is the thing to break down barriers. We need to be a collective and have these open conversations.
- For me the work is how do we acknowledge structural white supremacy and that we're affected by it and still acknowledge difference in a way that isn't divisive?
- White people came up with race. We are so many so many different ethnicities. I don't like the word Asian, I like to be called Chinese. Asian is a lie created by the white person. Japanese, Korean, and Chinese people get cast as each other all the time in theater and film. We need to create an idea of creating an idea of POC that isn't just based on the oppression that holds us together.

What are your experiences as a POC working with art institutions?

- I find that artists of color are expected to do something that reflects what the white world sees them as or they are expected to do identity art. If their work is "a little too dangerous" it doesn't get funded. I have been an "emerging artist" for 20 years. I get curated into things by panels. When I do get paid it's get dirty money. I want to get paid but, when I trace back how I got my artist fee, it's dirty money, corporation money, always.
- One thing I've noticed on the national scale a lot of institutions spend so much money on consultants on arts equity. Why can you not just pay someone in the community? What does it look like to pay people from the community to come in and talk about racial equity?
- As someone who does race equity work, these are people are bought on temporarily. It could be solved by staffing by POC. You could just diversify your staff and your institution will start to reflect those values.
- Institutions assemble a community group to make sure there aren't any missteps. Being an emerging artist you don't want to turn down these opportunities. Two instances where I was on a committee and afterwards there were jobs openings, I applied and I was told I was overqualified. It was frustrating that I had given them my intellectual capital, and in one case they didn't even give me an interview. The places that we'd like to work are few and far between where you're paid a living wage with benefits. I have to look outside of Philadelphia which is not what I want to do. My artistic work is thriving but professionally it feels like a desert.
- Maybe you know too much. Maybe you have too much expertise you're the dangerous person who will take it to a different level.

Where in Philadelphia do you see success in POC making decisions about which POC get money?

- Asian Arts Initiative. This is a place where they work towards equity.
- I work at AAI and we've never had a problem getting staff from diverse backgrounds. In the meetings and working sessions I've had with other cultural organizations, they always express difficulties in finding applicants of color. We never had that problem, I don't know

why they have it.

- They always say they can't find any qualified applicants.
- I feel like the [ICA](#), and PAFA have done good work. I've seen changes in Philadelphia and we all agree it's not enough. It's always a struggle of where to fit myself in this diverse situation. I run this gallery with my husband who is white and we don't identify as a race oriented institution per se. The funding—the pressure, the pressure of what they want us to do, it's a struggle where they want to help us but there is a limitation—you have to be this amount Asian to do this. We see that all that time in race relationships, but particularly in funding. How do we give feedback to them without seeming ungrateful? I used to intern at the ICA and back then it was a smaller staff and now its huge with a variety of exhibitions and is one of the most inclusive institutions in the city. I feel on a small scale, little by little, they are trying.
- I still have the concern that maybe they're putting people there as tokenism. In my experience I see that we as POC are viewed as a category rather than individuals. A white person can be authentic and expressing themselves while a POC is too emotional. They are looking for people to fit in rather than looking at each person uniquely.
- How much will change until leadership changes? How much are institutions willing to divest power?

Concluding thoughts

- These institutions treat us like welfare recipients; pee in this jar to see if you can get this funding. That's that system that needs to be changed.
- To the white people in the room, if you go into a venue or a room and you see nothing but white people there, that's not an accident. If you're white and you see nothing but white people and you blend in and feel comfortable, then you are accepting the basic tenant of white superiority. If you are conformable with that filter, you are part of the problem.