

# Reimagining What's Possible



**Clockwise from top: Guests at the opening of *Toward Common Cause* at Stony Island Arts Bank; Installation view of work by Njideka Akunyili Crosby at the National Public Housing Museum; Rick Lowe at the opening of *Black Wall Street Journey* at Urban Juncture; Work by Wendy Ewald in collaboration with youth from Centro Romero, at Weinberg/Newton Gallery.**

Photo by Nancy Wong; Jonathan Loic Rogers; Photos by Nicolette Stanton; and Evan Jenkins

**A conversation with MacArthur Foundation President John**

## Palfrey

We sat down with John Palfrey, President of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, to discuss the development, scope, and impact of *Toward Common Cause: Art, Social Change, and the MacArthur Fellows Program at 40*.

The exhibition explores the extent to which certain resources—air, land, water, and even culture—can be held in common. Raising questions about inclusion, exclusion, ownership, and rights of access, the exhibition considers art’s vital role in society as a call to vigilance, a way to bear witness, and a potential act of resistance. Presented on the 40th anniversary of the MacArthur Fellows Program, *Toward Common Cause* employs the Fellows Program as “intellectual commons” and features new and recontextualized work by 29 visual artists who have been named Fellows since the award program’s founding in 1981.

John Palfrey, a highly regarded educator, author, legal scholar, and innovator with expertise in how new media is changing learning, education, and other institutions, has been the Foundation president since 2019.

*The MacArthur Foundation has supported many of the artists featured in the exhibition over the past several decades through the Fellows Program as they’ve deepened and expanded their work. What is it like organizationally and personally to see this group of artists come together in a joint exhibition?*

It was a thrilling and thought-provoking opportunity, and the

range of artistic practices that we saw and the diversity of the artists and how they've developed over the years—it was an amazing chance to see all those things come together. These were people who've been named Fellows across many decades, so in some ways this exhibition was a chance for us to see the long arc of the Fellows Program and how it supported artists, and at the same time how this group of artists has responded to the urgent moment that we're in and the social and environmental concerns we face. I was really excited to have the chance to see that full range on display and the breadth of human creativity represented.

And then to see the way in which it's connecting so many different disciplines—economics, climate science, history, and anthropology were all represented in this setting—I really saw the exhibition as a model for how we can make resources broadly available and accessible to communities across the city and do so in a way that is connected to MacArthur's commitment to the values of equity and inclusion. There is a hope to maintain sustainable relationships between artists and some of the venues, as well as maintain the way in which *Toward Common Cause* was developed in close collaboration with communities. All of these things suggest to me a long life for this project beyond the few months that it's open.

*What is the significance of this project for the MacArthur Foundation?*

It brings together 40 years of support for the artistic community, and it lets the world see in an accessible way what these 29 Fellows have produced. It really stands for the sustained sweep

of this effort on the part of the MacArthur Foundation and underscores our desire for this incredible, inspiring work to be accessible as broadly as it possibly can be.

*The MacArthur Foundation believes that art can lead to real change, which is of course a fundamental tenet of the exhibition. What do you see as the particular potential of the work in this exhibition? What do you hope people who see the exhibition take away from it?*

I hope that *Toward Common Cause* will help individuals explore the role that art can play in changing how communities and histories and landscapes are understood and valued more broadly. I feel that it's a real opportunity or invitation for community members in some direct ways. If you look at the work that [Wendy Ewald](#) has been doing with students at the [Centro Romero](#) youth program, where they're creating images and texts to capture aspects of daily lives and dreams and concerns, this is something that helps both those participating and those observing understand something different about contemporary immigration. And those works are now on view at the [Weinberg/Newton Gallery](#). Another site-specific example of this is the way that [Kerry James Marshall](#) has been creating with and on behalf of [BBF Family Services](#). This work was designed so it could remain in place there well beyond the run of the exhibition. So, my hunch is that this is an intervention that may have long-term impacts that are not yet realized. A third example is [Jeffrey Gibson's installation](#) at the [Newberry Library](#), which is intended to restore agency to Indigenous voices and calls on all of us, on the library and the MacArthur Foundation and the Smart Museum, to reevaluate the way that



our cultural institutions represent Indigenous cultures. So there are a number of things that have happened through this process that will have, I hope, long-lasting effects in terms of how we think about art and social change.

*This exhibition also celebrates 40 years of MacArthur Fellows, the awards program that grants “genius awards” for innovation, intellect, and creativity across a number of fields including the visual arts. What’s the most exciting thing for you and for the MacArthur organization as we celebrate this programmatic milestone and the host of amazing artists presenting work in *Toward Common Cause*?*

Since the early years of the MacArthur Foundation, which made its first grants in 1978 and named its first Fellows in 1981, the MacArthur Fellows Program in many respects for many people has been synonymous with the Foundation itself. I would say also that the city of Chicago has been synonymous with MacArthur in some ways as well. And the city has so many unique characteristics, which has made it a perfect canvas for a project as dynamic as this one. For my part, it was so exciting to see how *Toward Common Cause* turned the city of Chicago, our home city, into a kind of re-imagined gallery space. The idea of the city as gallery, where art reaches out into communities and meets audiences directly in dozens of neighborhoods, this has been a crucial part of the story.

*What do you think the city of Chicago in particular brings to an exhibition like this?*

When we were thinking about how to celebrate 40 years of the

Fellows program, we quickly dismissed the idea of big gala events. Instead, we decided we wanted to celebrate the vibrant set of neighborhoods that makes up Chicago, each with its own specific and unique culture and history and all of which we think enrich the city's artistic traditions. That combined with the unbelievable renowned architecture and public spaces and public art that Chicago is so well-known for, and the fact that Chicago has been an incubator broadly for socially engaged artistic practices and artistic-run spaces—I can't imagine a better city as gallery than Chicago. [Kara Walker's installation at the Roundhouse at the DuSable Museum of African American History](#) is a powerful example of how art can activate a public space. And likewise, I just loved the [Stony Island Arts Bank](#) exhibition that Theaster Gates' team put on. It demonstrated how art and social change can revitalize existing structures that were left for demolition but now have been reignited in an incredible way.

*This exhibition spans conventional spaces including the Smart Museum as well as unconventional venues like the ones you mentioned above and many more across the city. How does the variety of spaces address questions of art accessibility and community access, as well as celebrating with the whole of Chicago?*

Chicago has so many incredible, iconic spaces, and you could imagine any one of them, including the Smart, housing an extraordinary single exhibition—but how much more exciting to have it in 19 partner venues. It has made the exhibition so widely accessible, and it doesn't expect that people will take time off of work or go on a Saturday to a particular space in the

city. Instead, it thinks about social service organizations, public housing facilities, and, of course, familiar community event and museum spaces as venues for this extraordinary art. That has been a distinctive and fascinating aspect of this process and one that has been a great showcase for the richness of Chicago's neighborhoods and communities.

The National Museum of Mexican Art, which is one of the partner venues and a cultural anchor of Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, has strong connections to Chicago's longstanding and growing Mexican community and work from Amalia Mesa-Bains commissioned for *Toward Common Cause* is included as a part of the Museum's annual *Día de Muertos* exhibition. Likewise, the Minnie Riperton Apartments within the Chicago Housing Authority have been hosting Njideka Akunyili Crosby's project, which reminds us of the care and respect the people who live in these buildings deserve. There are so many ways in which the unconventional aspects of displaying work within the context of housing communities as well as traditional museum spaces and community spaces makes the case for art being a vital resource for the general public and an important force in everyday life.

*Do you feel like that sets up a model for art going forward? Is there a movement towards presenting art in more unconventional spaces as something dynamic and accessible?*

I hope so. As a member of the philanthropic community, I would say the shift that we've made in our Arts and Culture funding, which is now called Culture, Equity, and the Arts, has made exactly that pivot that you're describing. Rather than

have a small number of us in the Foundation choose who gets the arts and culture grants and then typically giving them to a small number of downtown organizations, we have a broader set of community members who are making those decisions and a broader set of grantees representing a broader set of neighborhoods and individuals, as artists but also as audience members, as venues, and so forth. I believe that this is part and parcel of a really exciting change in the art world and something that is only going to be positive from a democratic perspective.

*Turning to the home front of the Smart Museum and the University of Chicago, how has the collaboration with an academic institution known for research and scholarship shaped the exhibition?*

The role of the University of Chicago has been instrumental in this exhibition. It's the core venue and the coordinator of all 19 venues, and I think the breadth and depth of what the University brings in terms of disciplines has been reflected in the exhibition so well. I was very excited that this partnership came together the way that it did. There are so many parts of the University that have played a particular role in *Toward Common Cause*: the [Abrams Environmental Law Clinic](#), [Arts + Public Life](#), the [Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry](#), the [Harris School of Public Policy](#) and the [Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation](#), the [Neubauer Collegium for Culture and Society](#), the [Open Practice Committee](#), and the [Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts](#) all played vital roles. And the ability to take advantage of these intellectual and cultural resources within one university has really helped bring alive the diverse bodies of work



represented in the exhibition and the varied experiences it offers.

*Do you think the collaboration with a scholarly institution like the University of Chicago has impacted the overall presentation and direction of the exhibition?*

My personal experience of the exhibition—and by that, I mean at the Smart, but also at the Stony Island Arts Bank and elsewhere around the city—has been one of deep engagement that I could describe as a scholarly experience, learning about and engaging with incredible art. But I also think that the connectedness of the University of Chicago is an example of the how the great strengths of multiple institutions coming together has made the whole of this show greater than the sum of the parts.

*Why does Toward Common Cause matter right now, to the MacArthur Foundation and to the broader artistic conversation?*

This exhibition gave us a chance to develop and to highlight some of the things we are trying to do broadly as a Foundation. We are working to have a more participatory and inclusive approach to grant making, and I think that's very true of this particular process as it's been in close collaboration with members of many communities across Chicago. This has been more of a from-the-ground-up type effort than a top-down approach to exhibition making, and I credit the Smart Museum's team in embracing that entirely.

It also shows the way in which we seek to stand in solidarity with leaders of social movements and individuals who are close

to the communities that we seek to serve. Art gives voice to perspectives and dreams and ideas of individuals and communities most impacted by things like COVID-19, like the racism endemic in our society, and that's essential to our work at the MacArthur Foundation as we seek to become an anti-racist organization and as we seek to transform systems and structures and practices over time.

The fundamental thing about art is the way that it helps us to reimagine what's possible. And our goal is really to deconstruct systems that have brought about pain and brought about inequity and to reconstruct a more vibrant and equitable, inclusive society. And the ability to do that through this exhibition and through art in general is one of the great privileges of working at the MacArthur Foundation. We're thrilled about this chance to work with you and the Smart Museum and so many partner venues across the city to bring it to life.

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Written by Ellen Wiese

Posted December 7, 2021 11:42am

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