

Fleisher Art Memorial's BYOP (Bring Your Own Project) Initiative: Devising a Program Model

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Abstract

Fleisher Art Memorial's BYOP (Bring Your Own Project) initiative reimagined how its exhibitions efforts operate from a curatorial and partnership-based perspective through the development of two artistic residencies in collaboration with two advocacy organizations, VietLead and Women Organized Against Rape. A new program model emerged through BYOP's focus on shared power and cultural equity. This case study describes the BYOP initiative's development, the evolution of its program model, and the impact of the project on Fleisher Art Memorial. The case study finds that the BYOP model encompasses three traits -- generative listening, fluidity, and trust (in the project's process and among the people who participated in it). It also finds that though some conflicts did occur, BYOP was successful in challenging Fleisher's existing exhibitions practices, as evidenced by the flexible program model it created and the culture embodied within its process. These findings are based on observation, participation, and other data gathered over the course of the initiative by the project's evaluator, the author of this article.

Keywords

Community partnership, community engagement, exhibitions program, resident artist program model

Introduction

Fleisher Art Memorial is a nonprofit community arts center in Southeast Philadelphia, a neighborhood with a deep history of attracting immigrants from many different parts of the world. Its mission is to make art accessible to everyone, regardless of economic means, background, or artistic experience. The organization was founded in 1898 by Samuel S. Fleisher and officially became a 501(c)3 nonprofit in 1983. Fleisher serves more than 20,000 people each year, with an operating budget of around \$2 million per year, and about \$4.5 million in endowment funds. The Endowment's returns (~5%/year) are used for general operating support and to provide funds for artists' awards. Fleisher also has a fiduciary relationship with the Philadelphia Museum of Art, who manages some of the organization's funds and financial activity. At the time of this case study, Fleisher employed 16 fulltime staff, numerous other contractors (mostly teaching artists), and had 27 board members, including 6 ex officio officers.

In its programming, Fleisher adheres to three core values based in its founder's ideals. These are: that within every individual are the ingredients for original artistic expression; that an individual's ability to use art is a vital means for personal exploration and growth; and, that nurturing individual creative potential leads to community-wide benefits. Those values are apparent in Fleisher's three main programming areas. The first, and what Fleisher is best known for in the Philadelphia region, is year-round, low- and no-cost tuition studio classes for all ages. Fleisher also programs regular exhibits of professional artists, faculty, and students. Finally, Fleisher conducts community-based programs including classes and residencies both on- and off-site for local schools and neighborhood partners.

Fleisher Art Memorial's BYOP (Bring Your Own Project) initiative was a multi-year project in which Fleisher initiated a collaboration with two other nonprofit, community-based organizations to develop community-based artist residencies. This case study describes the initiative's development and the evolution of its operating model. The narrative's primary consideration is the impact of the initiative on Fleisher Art Memorial. The case study's findings are based on observation, participation, and other data gathered over the course of the initiative in the author's role as the project's evaluator.

Project History and Background

Roughly a decade ago, Fleisher Art Memorial received a multi-year grant from the Wallace Foundation to explore its engagement practices.¹ Fleisher had noticed that the surrounding neighborhood, which had changed demographically (particularly in terms of ethnic and economic diversity) over time, was not strongly engaged in its current programs and events. In the subsequent research and exploration, Fleisher received three messages from its neighbors - come to us, show us, and welcome us. Neighbors wanted Fleisher to come to them, so that they could learn more about what Fleisher was, what it values, and how they would be received if they chose to participate in its activities and programs.

Neighbors from the Southeast Asian, Mexican, and African American communities of South Philadelphia spoke about two key audiences for Fleisher's work, and the values of art they felt Fleisher could tap into for them. These audiences were youth, for whom the value of art lay in developing a well-rounded person, and elders, for whom the value of art was identified as connecting them to their countries of origin, and grounding themselves in this community. As a result, Fleisher made numerous changes to its structure and practices over time. Staff, who previously spoke almost exclusively English, are now fluent in multiple languages. New programs were developed, and existing ones rebuilt, through community-led processes, resulting in changes that placed key decision-making in the hands of participants rather than Fleisher staff. One example is the teen program, where potential visiting artists pitch their projects directly to teens, who then decide which artists they want to work with.

Fleisher's exhibitions program came later to this process of change. Some existing programs had been a part of the organization for more than a century, and many hewed closely to the

¹ For more information, see *Staying Relevant in a Changing Neighborhood: How Fleisher Art Memorial is Adapting to Shifting Community Demographics* (Harlow, Bob. 2015. Part of The Wallace Foundation's series, Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, available online at <https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Staying-Relevant-in-a-Changing-Neighborhood-How-Fleisher-Art-Memorial-is-Adapting-to-Shifting-Community-Demographics.pdf>).

traditional model of an organization exercising the expertise and curatorial control to determine what artistic works were shown. At the time BYOP began, Fleisher was presenting nine thematic exhibitions annually. Three of these were faculty-related, three were part of an annual juried competition, and three were student exhibitions. These exhibits served to share the work of Fleisher's artists and pedagogy with the community, and provided a venue in which emerging and professional artists shared their work. The art product held the primary value in determining what work would be shown.

About five years ago, Fleisher's exhibitions staff began to work with the organization's Mexican neighbors, seeking ways to support the creation of altars and other related elements of their Dia de Los Muertos celebrations. As the work progressed and their relationships with neighbors deepened, Fleisher began to ponder three ideas -- 1. How can Fleisher support work in the community, rather than just within the walls of the organization?; 2. How can Fleisher engage with a community beyond the duration of a typical exhibit?; and, 3. How can an exhibition be more about the process of its creation than the final artistic product?

These questions led to BYOP (Bring Your Own Project), an initiative by Fleisher to bring the same radical re-thinking to its exhibitions agenda they brought to their other programs and activities over the prior decade. From the beginning, two ideas laid a clear foundation for BYOP -- Fleisher would not require that project partners exhibit in their galleries, but rather, would support the exhibition of artistic work where participants deemed it most appropriate; and, Fleisher would aim to fully share ownership of the process among the project's partners.

BYOP's project partners, Women Organized Against Rape and VietLead, were approached for the initiative after reflection by Fleisher's staff on their existing relationships and prior project collaborations. Fleisher's staff noticed that in previous experiences with both organizations, each had exhibited interest in increasing agency and taking ownership of the work. This led Fleisher staff to feel that all organizational partners, including Fleisher, were ready to engage in the collaborative development of an experimental, explorational, shared-ownership project model for the exhibitions program.

Fleisher conceived BYOP as a way to rethink its exhibitions program, and to explore how they might shift the center of this work from juried gallery spaces to community-led experiences. In doing so, BYOP also represented Fleisher's attempt to grapple with the power structures inherent in the arts world, and the organization's role in unconsciously reinforcing those systems. At its heart, BYOP is about Fleisher's exploration of cultural equity, defined in the initiative as access to the ability to create art, and to participate freely and fully in the creative process.

As Fleisher's exhibitions staff observed, the spaces where art is presented impact its accessibility. They realized that the physical structures of gallery spaces effectively function as gates that either admit or exclude prospective viewers of art, with the organization itself serving as the gatekeeper. In conceiving the BYOP initiative, Fleisher sought to learn how it could expand access to effectively dismantle the gates it had unconsciously built.

Methodology

Throughout the BYOP initiative, Fleisher sought to capture and translate the process of its work for use by other arts organizations. Goals included understanding what helped (and hindered)

the BYOP process along the way, and describing the model into which the partnerships evolved through the arc of participation in the initiative. This was accomplished through qualitative evaluation of interviews with Fleisher staff and board members, as well as direct observation of, and participation in, BYOP planning and learning meetings.

As this case study focuses on the project's impacts on Fleisher itself, BYOP's impacts on VietLead and Women Organized Against Rape (WOAR) are not discussed in depth. The impacts of the project on its participants beyond their effects on Fleisher Art Memorial and its exhibitions program model are also not discussed in depth.²

All data for this evaluation was reviewed and thematically coded by the author of this article. Protocols to protect against bias were implemented throughout the collection and review of data. Participants were asked to review the results, and findings were checked for alternative explanations. As much of the evaluation data is qualitative, quotes are used throughout the report to share various stakeholders' reflections in their own words. Quotes are taken from data gathered for the initiative's podcasts, videos, and catalogue. Additional quotes are from the author's notes taken during Working and Advisory group meetings held throughout the initiative. The findings presented here represent themes that emerged from coding and review of the aggregated qualitative data, and, unless otherwise indicated, are not intended to represent any single individual's opinion.

Development of the BYOP Program Model

Over the course of two years, Fleisher, VietLead, and WOAR explored how three other well-regarded organizations structure their exhibitions and artist residency programs. The models were selected based on their attention to the role of the artists and community members involved. The descriptions of these models provided here offer context for the development of the BYOP initiative's program model.

Wing Luke Museum - Community Exhibitions Model

The Wing Luke Museum's Community Exhibitions Model³ was one of Fleisher's early inspirations for BYOP. This model views museum staff as organizers and supporters of a group of core community members who are at the center of the exhibit design process. The core community members have extensive agency to shape an exhibit's story, contents, and interpretive elements. Staff also work with community members who are the subjects of the exhibit.

Wing Luke's work is based in articulated values,⁴ principles, and practices that are applied to all projects. The values include viewing relationships as the foundation of the work, regarding people as sources of meaning and purpose, and aiming to achieve empowerment of and ownership by community members involved in the work. The Museum notes that it has learned

² Readers interested in learning more about the participating organizations and the project's impacts on its participants can visit BYOP's website at <https://fleisher.community/programs/bring-your-own-project/>

³ Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, Our Process, <http://www.wingluke.org/our-process>, Accessed Oct 22 2018.

⁴ Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, Our Values: A Community-Based Heart, <http://www.wingluke.org/about-us/>, Accessed May 3 2019.

that successful engagement in this kind of values-based work is labor intensive, requiring both flexibility and a willingness to cede control on the Museum's part.

Ten stated principles of the work guide the process of developing community-based exhibits. Some of these principles, such as rooting the work in relationships of trust and respect, serve as reminders that align the work with the Museum's values. Other principles, like creating safe spaces for expression and avoiding top-down decision-making, provide more structural direction for the work.

Wing Luke's acknowledgement that working in this manner is labor intensive, requiring flexibility and a willingness to relinquish organizational control, helped Fleisher articulate what its staff and board needed to embrace for BYOP to succeed. Their principles for community-based work provided a clear description of the practice of shared ownership and project development that Fleisher aimed to achieve. Fleisher appreciated this model's attention to how community stories are shaped and represented by the community members themselves, rather than by the museum's curatorial staff. Fleisher also appreciated the follow-up with community members after exhibits occur. Fleisher diverged from Wing Luke's model by eschewing the idea that projects culminate in exhibitions at the museum.

Urban Bush Women - Entering, Building, and Exiting Community (EBX) Model

Another model Fleisher considered comes from the dance company Urban Bush Women. This model, called Entering, Building, and Exiting Community (EBX), views artists as "front-line social justice workers" who leverage the arts as a vehicle for social activism and civic engagement.⁵ It describes artist residencies as happening in three phases -- entering a community, building or engaging a community, and then exiting that community. The model provides artists with tools and methodologies for navigating a variety of assumptions regarding community-based practices throughout each of these phases of a residency project.

What Fleisher appreciated about this model is its attention to the role of the resident artist in a community. Their lingering question about the model concerned what happens after an artist "exits." Specifically, Fleisher wanted to explore how inter-organizational relationships developed during an artist's residency could remain, grow, or transition over time once the residency period ends. Fleisher hypothesized that they could add a fourth, organizationally-specific, stage to the model about transitioning to the next phase of partner organizations' relationships with one another.

Harvester Arts - Exhibitions Program Model

The third model Fleisher considered is that of Harvester Arts in Wichita, Kansas. Started in 2014, the mission of this program is to provide a thoughtful platform for visual arts experimentation that engages the community through critical dialogue and the creation of new work, providing an opportunity to experience art as more than consumable objects.⁶ In this model, visiting resident artists come to Wichita for two weeks and are partnered with local artists, student groups, and area creatives to engage with each other's ideas and processes.

⁵ Urban Bush Women, Engage with UBW, <https://www.urbanbushwomen.org/learn-with-ubw/>, Accessed Oct 25 2018.

⁶ Harvester Arts, <https://harvesterarts.com>, Accessed Oct 25 2018.

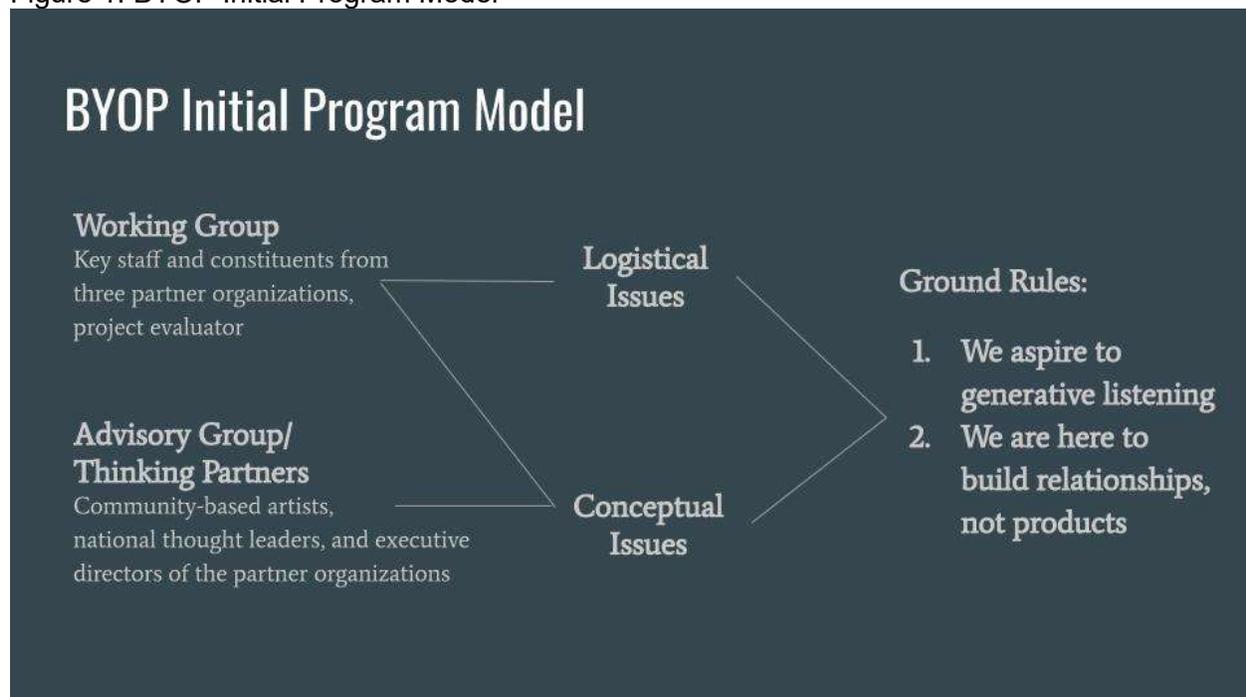
This model, like Urban Bush Women’s, speaks to the role of the resident artist as a catalyst within a community. It also invites community response, partnership and dialogue within that process. Like the Wing Luke Museum, it creates tangible outputs in the form of exhibits and other events, though in this case, there are multiple forms of activity that happen in locations across the Wichita community.

Fleisher appreciated that in the Harvester Arts program model there is attention paid to what happens in the community after a residency ends and an artist leaves. They still wondered, however, about the emergent question of the relationships among multiple organizations and participants, and how these transition over time as the result of a residency project.

Fleisher Art Memorial - BYOP (Bring Your Own Project) Program Model

BYOP’s initial model consisted of two groups of stakeholders — a Working Group and an Advisory Group — working in tandem as the project developed. Representatives from the three partner organizations (Fleisher, VietLead, and WOAR) formed the Working Group, which met regularly over the course of two years to tackle logistical questions about what the residency projects would be and how they would work. The Advisory Group (also referred to as the initiative’s “Thinking Partners”), composed of national thought leaders, community-based artists, and the Working Group partners’ executive leadership, engaged in dialogue with the Working Group to consider guiding philosophical ideas such as, “How can exhibits be more about the process than the product?” and, “What is the role of an artist in a residency, and how does this change based on the context of any given residency experience?” Figure 1 shows the structure and process of the Working and Advisory Groups, and represents BYOP’s initial program model.

Figure 1. BYOP Initial Program Model



This initial program model for Fleisher Art Memorial’s BYOP initiative shows the structure, purpose, and ground rules of the Working and Advisory Groups.

Throughout the process, by Fleisher's design, two ground rules were articulated and revisited at the start of every Advisory Working Group meeting. These included a set of listening principles, and the idea that what was being built (and built upon) were relationships, not products. Otto Scharmer's theory of generative listening served to frame these conversations.⁷ Generative listening involves moving beyond listening just to respond to or to empathize with others, in order to get to a place where listening is not about oneself, but about the present moment and the emergent ideas that are co-created within it. For Fleisher, generative listening was a way to share power and promote equity in discussions about BYOP.

Rituals for the meetings developed by Fleisher staff also helped reinforce this idea, such as the opening of each gathering, where all present were asked not just to introduce themselves, but to offer one word that expressed how they were feeling. This was repeated at the end of each gathering, serving as a succinct bookend to both prepare participants to be fully present in the BYOP process, and to reflect with each other on what happened, what was learned, and what participants felt over the course of each discussion.

The idea of focusing the process on building relationships and exploring ideas, rather than on the production of artistic or other pre-determined outputs, aligned with Fleisher's goal that this experiment not be bound by the traditional outcomes of an exhibitions program. The willingness to engage in open-ended discussion about the role and value of art and artists in communities further exemplifies the idea of shared power in BYOP, as Fleisher did not prescribe any next steps in answer to the questions brought up by the Advisory and Working Groups, but rather supported the emergence of answers through collective discussion and argument.

Evolution of the BYOP Model

At the beginning of the process, the only identifiable portion of the BYOP model was that which guided the formation, purpose, and discussions of the Working and Advisory Groups as they developed and implemented the artist residencies. Though all of the partner organizations shared an initial sense that BYOP, if successful, could empower its participants through creative experiences and growth, no clear detail was available on the intended or expected outputs of the residencies. This reflected a conscious choice to trust in, and focus on, an open-ended process and in the relationships among the initiative's stakeholders.

At the conclusion of the initiative, it is possible to look back and see that BYOP occurred in a series of traceable phases, spanning a much longer period of time than the discrete projects within it might otherwise indicate. Its structure relies on an understanding that it is built upon relationships, and that there are detectable milestones — recognizable points of entry, exit, and achievement — throughout its process. These milestones occur along flexible timelines that allow the work of individuals and organizations involved in the initiative to be driven by what happens as the projects and relationships evolve, rather than by a pre-determined measure of how long the work should take to manifest.

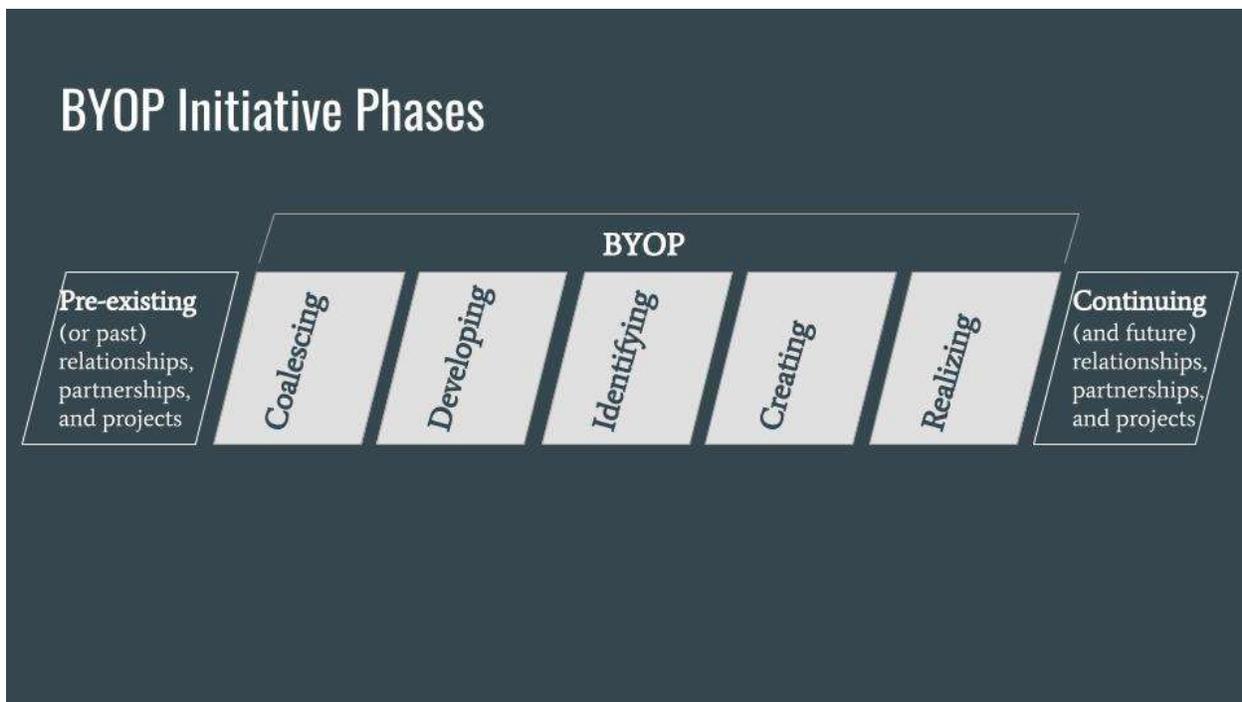
Throughout the course of the BYOP initiative, it became clear that these projects continually exist at the beginning, ending, and extension of relationships between organizations and individuals in a community. Each individual, whether a member of the Working or Advisory

⁷ Scharmer, Otto. 2016. *Theory U: Leading from the Future as it Emerges 2nd Edition*. San Francisco, CA; Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Groups, the staff of a partner organization, a resident artist, or a participant in the initiative’s residencies, has their own path of engagement, and their own points of connection within it. Similarly, each organization has a history of its relationships with the initiative’s partners, its community, and art that it brings to the process, and that will continue after the project is completed. Though BYOP could be defined as a discrete period of time in which three organizations came together to develop two artistic residencies that produced identifiable outcomes and impacts, it is more accurately described as a chapter within the life of each individual and organization engaged in it, and in their relationships with one another.

The initial model of BYOP captured the role and purpose of the Working and Advisory Groups. The model presented here complements the initial one, and further describes BYOP in terms of the phases that identify BYOP’s arc of work and its foundation on relationships. Figure 2 illustrates the different phases of the BYOP Program Model, identified after the conclusion of the initiative. It represents the model into which the initiative evolved over the course of time.

Figure 2: BYOP Initiative Phases



This figure shows the different phases of Fleisher Art Memorial’s BYOP Program Model, including the pre-existing and continuing relationships among those involved in the initiative.

The model begins with acknowledgement of the pre-existing relationships, partnerships, and projects among the individuals and organizations involved in BYOP. These relationships are crucial to the success of BYOP. They enable Fleisher to identify potential partner organizations for the initiative, and they form a foundation upon which its open-ended process and culture of generative listening, fluidity, and trust can be built.

The phases of work within the BYOP initiative, which can in practice overlap at varying moments, are:

Coalescing: In this early phase, the decision is made among the partner organizations to establish the BYOP initiative and to work together. Financial support for the initiative is sought

and secured. Each organization begins to identify what stakeholders will be involved, and to explore what goals and ambitions it may have for the process. This phase concludes when the Working and Advisory Groups for the initiative are established and begin to meet.

Developing: In this phase the Working and Advisory Groups form and periodically meet, establishing rituals and decision-making processes that support BYOP's community culture and goals for cultural equity. The Working and Advisory Groups initially serve to help formulate the initiative's logistical elements, and continue meeting to discuss logistical and artistic issues raised throughout the initiative. This phase concludes when the initiative's partner organizations indicate their readiness to identify and engage a resident artist.

Identifying: This phase includes exploration of the artist's role in the initiative's residency, development of an RFP and related criteria to select resident artists, and the selection process of the resident artists. Once selected, resident artists join regular meetings with the partner organizations and the Working and Advisory Groups to think through the structure, focus, intentions, and goals of each residency. This phase concludes when each residency is underway, and the resident artists are meeting and working regularly with BYOP participants.

Creating: This is the phase in which the residencies occur. Resident artists meet and work with BYOP participants and partner organizations, and remain involved in discussions with the initiative's Working and Advisory Groups. Residency participants identify and implement processes and practices to achieve their desired residency outcomes. This phase concludes when the Realizing phase occurs.

Realizing: This phase includes the tangible realization, or perceived completion, of any outputs for BYOP residency projects, such as creative works generated during or inspired by the residencies. Public events may be part of this phase, as applicable or appropriate to each residency.

The model concludes with the continuation of relationships from the initiative, as well as any future projects, partnerships, and other ideas inspired by any and all of the stakeholders' involvement in BYOP.

The BYOP Artist Residencies

Fleisher collaborated with WOAR and VietLead to develop two BYOP artist residencies. In WOAR's residency, facilitated by artist Laura Deutch, a group of migrant Latina women met weekly to explore their shared culture through artistic practices including collage, printmaking, sewing, embroidery, crochet, and cooking. Relationships built during the residency also supported the women in confronting adversity in their lives through artistic practice. At the residency's conclusion, the participants formed their own artistic collective, Valientes Guerreras (Brave Warriors), and publicly displayed the culminating work inspired by their BYOP experience at Philadelphia's Cherry St. Pier, a year-round, mixed-use public space on the banks of the Delaware River. In addition to smaller pieces created during the residency, the exhibit, titled "Life Is Not Disposable!," featured a monumental tapestry woven from recycled materials, including 60,000 soda tabs. As Fleisher noted, "The piece weaves symbols and pieces from compañeras (partners) no longer physically here, but spiritually present. Each woman's individual story is embedded in the piece, bound by strength, determination, and creative will."⁸

⁸ <https://fleisher.community/programs/bring-your-own-project/>, Accessed November 11, 2019.

VietLead’s residency, facilitated by artist Miki Palchick, was built upon its existing programs and explored gardening, cooking, and art-making practices with multiple generations of South Philadelphia’s Vietnamese residents. Young adults interviewed their families and community elders, many of whom are Vietnam War refugees. The nostalgic stories that emerged of their home country’s land, food, and farming, coupled with the youth’s observations of gardens in their current neighborhood, motivated them to design and illustrate a cookbook of community recipes. It also inspired the communal development and design of a multigenerational community garden at Horace Furness High School. When Palchick discovered lead paint at the site, the project became an advocacy campaign for safe school environments. Through VietLead’s ongoing SumOurRoots program, participants continue to lead efforts to promote community health, social justice, and equity.⁹

Cultural Equity and Shared Power in the BYOP Program Model

BYOP Project Director José Ortiz-Pagán described the initiative as one where, “the people inform the programming.” One of Fleisher’s guiding questions for BYOP, and its practices around cultural equity, concerns the idea of shared power. This is manifested in the initiative’s decision-making processes. Though the idea for BYOP originated at Fleisher, and Fleisher led the effort to seek and manage philanthropic investment in the project, the organization consciously chose not to exercise its potential authority as the administrator, artistic leader, or gatekeeper of the initiative’s resources. Instead, critical decisions about the initiative’s direction and resources were made collectively by BYOP’s Working Group. These decisions fell into three categories — curatorial, financial, and durational — representing choices about the initiative’s artistic elements, budget, and timeline, respectively. In all three areas, Fleisher fully shared decision-making authority with VietLead and WOAR.

Sharing curatorial decisions meant that all of the partner organizations had equal voices in all artistic elements of the initiative. In the selection process of the resident artists, for example, the Working Group collectively established RFP criteria, conducted candidate interviews as a group, and worked together to determine each resident artist’s contractual obligations and scope of work. Residency participants from the partner organizations then worked with the selected artists to shape the artistic elements of both residencies, which resulted in different day-to-day roles for each of the resident artists, as well as different outputs for each residency, all driven by the participants, not Fleisher, acting as the subject matter and art experts.

Financially, the Working Group, not just Fleisher, determined how the full project budget for each residency would be allocated. This led to innovative choices, including outlays for expenses such as child care for participants, that would not normally have been part of an exhibit program budget but were paid for in BYOP. The child care expenses highlight an important example of Fleisher’s attention to cultural equity. Child care is not typically offered to adult participants in arts programs of any kind (classes and workshops, exhibitions, or performances), by Fleisher or most other arts organizations, and yet, for those without access to it, child care is a limiting factor to cultural engagement, and thus a contributing factor to a lack of cultural equity. Upon learning about this barrier from WOAR participants, the Working Group removed it by providing for child care in the initiative’s budget. Other non-traditional exhibition

⁹ Maiorano, Grace. “Community garden sprouts more than plants.” South Philly Review. July 21, 2018. <https://southphillyreview.com/2018/07/31/community-garden-sprouts-more-than-plants/>, Accessed November 11, 2019.

program expenses for BYOP included opportunities for participants to spend time and share meals together while not engaged in artistic activities, to participate in the Working Group and Advisory Group meetings, and to visit artistic installations, such as Philadelphia's Magic Gardens.

Durationally, timelines and deadlines for all aspects of the initiative were flexible, and often extended, as BYOP developed. This was seen as a norm of the initiative, which gave BYOP a further opportunity to foster cultural equity, as this flexibility without judgement enabled all aspects of the work to progress along timelines that evolved organically and were driven by the participants themselves, rather than being determined by others. Project timelines were led by the natural unfolding of each residency, and the needs that emerged in each project. For example, VietLead's BYOP project began as an intergenerational garden at a local school, and evolved into a city-wide advocacy campaign for lead abatement throughout the school district when the garden's planned installation was unexpectedly halted by the resident artist's discovery of lead paint on the school grounds. This extended the project timeline, shifted the role of the art and the resident artist within the project, and re-directed some of its budget. It also resulted in additional financial support, in VietLead joining a larger local movement for safe school environments, and in a well-attended community advocacy forum promoting food justice and healthier schools.

Ortiz-Pagán describes the working nature of the initiative as “fluid,” a term that represents the flexibility of BYOP's structure and processes. The BYOP model depended on this fluidity, and the ability it provided to shift timelines and other aspects of the work as necessary to maintain progress while allowing ample time for relationship-building, personal reflection, group discussion, and collaborative decision-making. In this way, fluidity presented challenges to evaluating the progress and outcomes of BYOP using traditional measures, as many aspects of the work intentionally lacked initial clarity. Identifying achievement relative to those aspects, then, was also unclear at first. Rather than impeding the initiative, however, the fluid nature of the work provided the context for deeper discussion in the Working and Advisory Group meetings as the BYOP model evolved. Instead of declaring that work was, for example, “behind schedule” if a project timeline was extended, the Groups could instead explore what was driving the extension, and what that indicated about the next stages of the process and how the resources of the initiative might best be directed to support the emerging needs of the projects. This held true not just for time-oriented elements of the work, but for the creative and relationship-building aspects of BYOP, as well.

The fluidity found in BYOP's timeline also applied to the distribution of its financial and human resources, and the nature of its creative and artistic endeavor. Though general ideas (there will be an artist residency, the total budget available is \$x) were agreed upon at the start of the initiative, everyone involved understood that the process of the project itself was not set in stone (we will collectively find and engage resident artists, and make choices together about how the budget will be distributed and why), and that challenge, change, and discovery were an inherent part of the work, to be acknowledged and embraced as it progresses. In other words, no one knew, at the beginning of the project, what it would look like at the end, or what, exactly, would need to be done to arrive there.

By placing emphasis on relationship-building throughout the initiative, the practices of generative listening and fluidity in BYOP enabled Fleisher to create a culture of trust that supported the pursuit of cultural equity. For example, Working and Advisory Group meeting agendas always included ample time to transition into the work of the meeting, to share meals together, and to, as one Advisory Group member described it, foster a sense of belonging

among everyone involved in the BYOP community. This was also facilitated through meeting rituals, which gave everyone an equal voice at the table, helped frame the subsequent discussions, and provided attendees insight into and additional recognition of one another. Practices like these served the initiative in two ways. They brought to the Working and Advisory Group meetings the resources upon which trust in one another could develop, and they aligned with one of the core values expressed in Fleisher's mission — the value of art to support individual growth and development, and its contribution to building strong, thriving, empowered communities.

Challenges to the BYOP Program Model

This fluid, open-ended and flexible process was not without its challenges, one being the impact of shifting relationships during the project. Two of the key Working Group members changed jobs during BYOP. Their departures from the project affected the Working Group's process and impacted the shared trust built up to this point. At these moments, the initiative's practice of fluidity was utilized to provide time and space for existing relationships to be repaired, and for new relationships, initiative workflows, and shared trust to be built.

Another challenge came in understanding where BYOP and its collective decision-making process fit within the organizational hierarchy of decision-making at Fleisher. For example, while Fleisher staff working directly on BYOP were fully on board with the shared decision-making nature of the initiative, this was not always the case with others, who saw Fleisher as primarily responsible for the project's decisions. As a result, BYOP representatives sometimes found themselves having to defend the initiative's choices, such as budget allocations to childcare, internally to their colleagues.

The fluidity of timing, which enabled the BYOP residencies to proceed at an organic pace, sometimes fell into conflict with Fleisher's other organizational needs. WOAR's artistic residency, for example, lost its weekly meeting space at Fleisher when an exhibit space that the group had been using was reallocated for classroom space. Yet, while on the one hand this constituted the displacement of an already-displaced group of people (the migrant persons participating in the residency), it also catalyzed those participants to take increasing ownership of the project, and to proactively seek a place outside Fleisher where they could continue the work.

In ways similar to Fleisher's struggles with BYOP's decision-making, the organization was challenged to understand where exactly BYOP fit within its existing operations model. For example, while the initiative took place over a two-plus year period, it was not directly identified anywhere on Fleisher's website until spring 2019, once both residencies had reached a culminating stage of presenting a creative product. BYOP did not have, at its inception, the kind of expected, tangible elements that could anchor its presence online. No one knew what would be created in either of the artistic residencies when they began, and the possibility was held open that they might not result in any material artistic products or exhibitions at all. As an experimental initiative, BYOP's story was perceived as difficult to tell until it had occurred. In the end, a webpage dedicated to the BYOP initiative launched in spring 2019.¹⁰ Interestingly, in the hierarchy of Fleisher's website, BYOP is categorized as a Community Program, not an Exhibition.

¹⁰ The website can be viewed at <https://fleisher.community/programs/bring-your-own-project/>.

The project also raised questions about cultural equity within both the Working and Advisory Groups, best summarized as, “Who has the right to tell someone else’s story?” Group members realized that although Fleisher was working hard to offer its spaces, resources, and expertise to the initiative’s participants without determining or dictating how they would subsequently be utilized, the organization was also interested in telling the story of the initiative, which includes the stories of its participants, the partner organizations, and the project’s evolution. At first, Fleisher’s partner organizations expressed concern that this constituted a misuse and reclamation of their participants’ stories and personal experiences. In response, the initiative’s video and audio documentarians worked closely with members of the Working and Advisory Groups to gain their trust throughout the process, and to ensure that documenting the story of the initiative included respectful representation of the many other stories contained within it. This included engaging the initiative’s participants in the direction of the story-gathering process. Residency participants recorded interviews with each other, and interviewed members of their community. These interviews became a series of podcasts and videos made available on the BYOP website. In this way, the documentary process of the initiative also became part of BYOP’s efforts towards achieving greater cultural equity, as the participants themselves, rather than the documentarians, led the process of creating and telling their stories.

The Role of Artists in BYOP

A final challenge for BYOP came from the realization that in a two-year (or longer, when one takes Fleisher’s prior work with VietLead and WOAR into account) arc of relationship building and project development, BYOP’s resident artists are the ones who spent the least amount of time on the project. Each resident artist was engaged for a sixth-month period in 2018. These artists entered the BYOP process well after the Working and Advisory Groups had engaged in deep discussions about artists and residencies, and their formal engagements ended before the outputs of either project were fully realized. What does this mean? It may be akin to the model of Harvester Arts, which has a clearly defined, community-embraced role for a resident artist as a catalyst that does not require their presence for the duration of the project or to maintain and develop the other relationships created in the process. Or, it may be that this is an aspect of BYOP’s model that warrants revision and refinement, to ensure that resident artists feel as connected to the BYOP community as others involved in the initiative do.

The Working and Advisory Groups had many conversations about the role of artists in residencies. They grappled with defining what all arts training, regardless of discipline or genre, shares in terms of the skill sets its artists develop. Over time, they settled on a common set of traits, including:

- confidence in one’s own voice, agency, and ideas
- faith in a process that does not have a clear endgame in sight
- the capacity to be vulnerable
- a creative process of one’s own
- the technique to create and the skills to build or develop something
- the abilities to integrate, curate, and edit

The groups collectively determined that what an artist could bring to a residency, distinct from knowledge about and experience with a specific artistic discipline, is a particular process of work, and a different way of thinking about its possibilities. In the end, Ortiz-Pagán describes the artists’ role in both residencies as that of an artist facilitator who enables others to think in new and different ways and explore unforeseen opportunities through the creative process. Perhaps

unsurprisingly, then, neither artist used their primary artistic medium as a foundation for the BYOP residencies. Rather, they brought the “soft skills” of their creative process and way of approaching problem-solving to bear in each situation. This is also what the partner organizations later recognized as the value the artists, and art, brought to their work through their participation in BYOP.

The resident artists’ attention to process and the flexibility possible within it reflects the aims of the BYOP initiative to create a model in which each residency could evolve in ways suitable to its context, and could support the artistic and personal growth of its participants, empowering both their creative and community agency. As one Advisory Group member noted, reflecting on the role the resident artists could play in the residencies, “The success of the project depends on who is asking the structured artistic questions.” In essence, this means that BYOP asked the resident artists to allow, as Ortiz-Pagán describes it, “other people’s aesthetic and process to be at the lead of the creative process.” Feedback from both resident artists indicated that they understood and embraced this as part of the BYOP initiative. As one resident artist observed, using creative means of problem-solving quickly extended its value beyond the creation of art, becoming essential to communication and relationship-building among residency participants in situations where participants spoke multiple languages.

Though BYOP’s impact on the residency participants is not fully examined in this case study, it is worth noting here that the flexibility and open-ended structure of BYOP supported the development of a particular kind of relationship between resident artists and the residency participants, one that enabled the resident artists to support cultural equity in the BYOP process. By removing the expectation that the artists’ role was to share or transfer a particular practice to the group, the artists were able to function as facilitators rather than gatekeepers in the development of the residency projects and their artistic outputs. This in turn supported the participants’ ability to strengthen their own artistic voices and creative agency during the residency period, and to continue developing both projects after the residencies were over.

Analysis and Discussion: BYOP’s Impact on Fleisher Art Memorial

BYOP challenged Fleisher in multiple ways that resulted in four clearly identifiable outcomes for the organization. It succeeded in changing the existing exhibitions practice, enabled Fleisher to shift its role in the community from gatekeeper to facilitator, developed a new program model for artist residencies, and led Fleisher to a deeper understanding of what cultural equity means and requires in practice.

Changes to Fleisher’s existing exhibitions practice were fostered through the three initial questions that led to the initiative’s creation. These questions compelled Fleisher to explore how to support work outside of its current scope, in terms of both where and how the work occurred. They also required that care and attention to the relationships among the people involved be a primary focus of the initiative, on par with its creative and artistic considerations. Finally, the questions encouraged Fleisher to view the process of the initiative, and of the residencies, as their own outcomes, regardless of artistic and creative outputs.

BYOP’s emphasis on community context, relationships, and process enabled Fleisher to continue the shift initiated a decade ago from artistic gatekeeper to facilitator. In the wake of BYOP, Fleisher continues to support the work begun in both residencies. WOAR’s residency participants, for example, formed their own artists’ collective inspired by their BYOP experience, which now meets weekly under its own leadership in Fleisher’s space.

The BYOP program model also inspired Fleisher staff to consider how its exhibitions program could function differently. In the organization's current program model, outside of BYOP, classes and exhibitions happen onsite, and community programs -- partnerships with neighborhood organizations and schools -- happen both on- and off-site. From an exhibitions program perspective, what inspired BYOP was the realization that while the reasons Fleisher's classes and exhibitions both happen onsite was apparent, the relationship between where exhibitions and community programs happened was less clear. In the end, neither of the BYOP artistic residencies culminated in exhibitions at Fleisher. WOAR's work was exhibited elsewhere, while VietLead's work took a form less amenable to traditional exhibition — a cookbook, community forum, garden design, and advocacy campaign.

The BYOP process challenged the partner organizations and Fleisher to engage in deep discussion and decisions about all of the initiative's artistic, financial, and time-oriented elements, and in doing so, led to new ideas for the exhibitions program to consider going forward. These ideas are grounded in the idea that Fleisher's community relationships, rather than its program structures, could form the core of its programmatic work. Fleisher program staff could serve as Community Liaisons, developing the organization's community relationships and utilizing Fleisher's classes, exhibitions, and community program structures as elements that can be customized to support the needs and interests of any given community partner.

This idea addresses Fleisher's initial question of how to develop relationships, rather than programs, through its exhibitions process by putting the community dynamic at the forefront of the programmatic work. It also honors the realization that initiatives like BYOP do not represent the beginning or the end of Fleisher's relationship with a community partner, but instead occur as a result of the interest of everyone involved in deepening their respective relationships with one another, and their community as a whole, through engaging in artistic and creative processes together. That work includes the creation of art, and also the creation of a process unique to each relationship's history and current context.

BYOP led Fleisher to a greater understanding of cultural equity, and how to foster it in Fleisher's exhibitions program. By placing community relationships, contexts, and interests at the heart of the exhibitions process, Fleisher can continue exploring how to bring its artistic and creative skills to a partnership as a facilitator, rather than gatekeeper, of art. This, in turn, further aligns Fleisher's exhibitions work with its mission to make — not just the exhibition of, but also the practice of — art accessible to everyone, regardless of economic means, background, or artistic experience.

Conclusion

Through the BYOP initiative, Fleisher Art Memorial successfully developed a flexible project model and culture that enabled it to advance cultural equity. BYOP's flexible program model is grounded in the exploration of shared values, creative endeavor, and human expression. Core values infusing the work included the belief that every individual brings worth to the process, and that expertise is not concentrated in any one organization or person, but rather built among the group as a whole.

In terms of creative endeavor, and in keeping with the recognition of BYOP as a phase in the life of the relationships involved, the artistic focus of BYOP's residencies rested more on art's process than its products. Even when tangibly manifest as outputs of the project, physical

objects of art were embraced as living artifacts embodying the value of the creative process that formed them, rather than as the ultimate goal of the work. The tapestry created in WOAR's residency expresses what its creators realized about themselves and their relationships with others in the process of its development, while the community garden designed during VietLead's residency represents the desire of multiple generations to empower, work with, and learn about their cultural heritage from one another. Neither creation was envisioned at the start of the process. Instead, both emerged from the participants' inspirations during the artist residencies.

In working through the challenges presented to its existing practices and procedures by the initiative's policy of shared decision-making and resource management, Fleisher was able to share power previously held within the organization. This is what enabled Fleisher to transition the organization's artistic role with its community partners from expert gatekeeper to collaborative facilitator. That shift of position, in turn, gave Fleisher's partner organizations the capacity to more fully realize the value of art within their respective communities and ongoing activities. It further enabled BYOP's participants to participate fully and freely in the creative process, and to explore art as a means to self-expression, self-empowerment, and social justice.

The author is deeply grateful to Fleisher Art Memorial and everyone involved in the BYOP initiative for their camaraderie, honesty, and creativity.

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