

A Better Picture for the Arts

by Nicole G. Anderson

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photo (cc) [Barry Yanovitz](#) During his administration Mayor Michael Bloomberg has encouraged high-profile public art projects such as [Olafur Eliasson's Waterfalls](#)

After Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's strained, and often turbulent, relationship with the art community, the arrival of Mayor Michael Bloomberg came as a great relief to many artists and New Yorkers working for the city's cultural institutions and art nonprofits. Most of their hopes have been realized. In sharp contrast to Giuliani, Bloomberg has been a strong and vocal advocate for the arts, supporting culture in his official capacity and as a philanthropist.

Over the last eight years, his administration has implemented a number of initiatives and programs designed to support small and large art nonprofits, museums, cultural institutions, performing arts groups and individual artists. In partnership with the Cultural Affairs Commissioner [Kate Levin](#), Bloomberg has made critical changes to the system of allocating funds to nonprofits and cultural groups, which have ultimately led to a significant rise in the number of organizations that receive funding from the city. While the economic downturn poses a threat to the welfare of the city's cultural institutions and artists, the mayor's office has stepped in and provided essential resources and new programming to ensure that the arts in New York City not only remain intact, but also continue to thrive.

At the same time Bloomberg has rallied for the art community, he also has been responsible for some flashy high profile projects that have received mixed reviews. [The Gates](#), Christo and Jeanne-Claude's installation in Central Park, won much acclaim and increased tourism and economic activity.

[Olafur Eliasson's Waterfalls](#)

, however, had far less impact on the local economy -- and got decidedly mixed reviews.

If Bloomberg has had a failing in his support of the arts, it comes in arts education, which some experts [say](#) has not received the attention it requires.

Streamlining the Funding Process

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One of the first priorities of the Department of [Cultural Affairs](#) has been eliminating the bureaucratic inefficiency of its funding procedures. From the 1980s until 2008, most arts funding was distributed through line items in the cultural affairs budget and City Council member items.

According to a [fiscal brief](#) from the New York City Independent Budget Office prepared by Shari Strauss, Bloomberg and City Council eliminated the 171 line-item allocations in 2008 and increased the [Cultural Development Fund](#) to \$30 million, in addition to adding a "\$5.6 million buffer of temporary funding to smooth the transition to the new allocation system." The goal, Bloomberg said in a statement released in late August was "to get more money to more organizations through an open, competitive peer-review process."

This overhaul opened up the application process to new cultural groups, resulting in a boost in the number of organizations receiving grants, Strauss found. "In the fiscal year 2007, prior to the change, 884 groups applied for program funding and 780 received awards; in the fiscal year of 2009, 1,084 groups applied for funding and 882 received awards," Strauss reported.

There also has been an increase in the number of multi-year grants awarded to large organizations with operating budgets of \$250,000 or more. "In fiscal year of 2008, 273 multiyear grants were awarded, and in 2009, an additional 187 group received multiyear grants," according to the Independent Budget Office.

Michael Royce, executive director of the [New York Foundation of the Arts](#), said these multi-year grants can play a major role in terms of offering long-term financial stability. "We were very fortunate to get a multi-year grant when Cultural Affairs switched over to the new panel process," he said. "Knowing that funding will not only be there for the year you are actively in, but also for the next [year], is a tremendous planning benefit and allows for expansion on other programs and ideas because you can take some of your focus off the fundraising and put that energy into exploring creative ways of serving your constituents."

The city also recently modified the process for evaluating grant applications from both small and large organizations to allow members of the art and cultural community to participate in peer review panels and therefore play an integral role in the new funding procedures.

"I think that Bloomberg has taken important steps through the Department of Cultural Affairs to

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make more transparent the funding process and the participatory process through selection and criteria of programming grant awardees," said Michael Unthank, executive director of the [Harlem Arts Alliance](#)

. "And that is very important."

Stepping Up Programs and Expanding Resources

The Bloomberg administration has nurtured and developed two pre-existing programs:

[Materials for the Arts](#)

and

[Percent for Art](#)

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Located in a warehouse in Long Island City, Material for the Arts supplies a wide range of organizations from art nonprofits to after school and community service programs with free, reusable art materials collected from a large number of donors. With a 10 percent increase in demand for materials over the last year, Materials for the Arts has expanded the warehouse space by 10,000 square feet and increased the value of materials donated and the number of organizations it serves.

The Percent for Art program subsidizes public art projects throughout the city by allocating 1 percent of the budget for city-funded construction projects to the creation of site-specific works by New York artists. Under Bloomberg, this program has continued to grow with 69 projects currently in progress and an estimated 16 new works to be commissioned. A few recent projects have included Tony Oursler's Splatter Project #1, a series of video installations set within formations resembling splatters of paint on various walls of [the Frank Sinatra School of the Arts in 2009](#) ; Linnaea Tillett and

Karin Tehve's light installation, entitled

[This Way](#)

, built in the Brooklyn Bridge Pedestrian Underpass in 2008; and Luisa Caldwell's three sculptures,

[Thought Bubbles: Earth, Sun & Universe](#)

, suspended from a public school library in Flushing since 2008.

While much of this funding goes through the Cultural Development Fund, the Department of Cultural Affairs' Capital Projects Fund provides significant support as well. With the help of the capital fund, the 33 members of the Cultural Institutions Group and 200 other cultural facilities have been able to complete substantial design and construction projects including historical renovations and expanding exhibition space. Those benefitting include [Lincoln Center](#) ,

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[Playwrights Horizon](#)

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[Museum of Arts & Design](#)

and the

[Bronx Museum of Art](#)

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The capital funding has also contributed to the growth of smaller organizations. Anne Pasternak, president and artistic director of [Creative Time](#), elaborates. The administration, not only aided big organizations, but, she said, "strove to do much in order to stabilize smaller organizations by providing permanent spaces as rents were driving organizations to be homeless. This will have a long-term impact on our city."

Falling Short

In June 2008, the office of New York City Public Advocate, Betsy Gotbaum, issued a report on the current state of art education in New York City public schools, entitled, [Out of Tune: A Survey on NYC Students' access to Arts Education](#)

. Gotbaum found, that only "7.1 percent of the 98 elementary schools that provided information for the survey, are in compliance with the state regulation requiring schools to offer instruction in all four arts disciplines -- music, visual arts, dance and theater."

Later that year the Department of Education issued its 2007-2008 [Annual Arts in School Report](#). While it found an increase in arts education from the previous years report, more than half of all elementary schools and two thirds of all high schools still did not offer all four art disciplines."

As part of its effort to give principals more control over school budgets, the Department of Education eliminated dedicated Project Arts funding for instruction in art, music, dance and theater. That funding now is folded into schools' general budgets and so principals can fund arts programs or shift money according to their own priorities.

Thinking Outside The Box

When the economy plummets, the support for the arts is usually the first to go. However, Bloomberg hopes to resist this trend. In late September, he announced the administration would launch five new initiatives: [Curate New York City](#), [New York City Performs](#), [JumpStart for](#)

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[the Arts](#)
[sts as Entrepreneurs](#)
[and lastly, the Arts Cluster Promotion Program.](#)

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While these services and programs will offer additional support, the city's art nonprofits still face the scary reality that they will continue to see cuts in funding from the Department of Cultural Affairs at a time when contributions from foundations and corporations have also diminished. According to the Independent Budget Office brief, the adopted arts budget for 2010 will be reduced by \$1.9 million from \$29 million to \$27.1 million before the end of the year. Strauss predicts that cultural organizations will most likely see further cuts in the 2011 budget.

Arts institutions are relieved the cuts have not proved worse.

"I believe that over the past eight years, Mayor Bloomberg has clearly demonstrated his support for the arts and culture in New York City -- not only by his personal support throughout this time period, but also through his support of the Department of Cultural Affairs and the number of initiatives that DCA has undertaken," said Arnold L. Lehman, the director of the [Brooklyn Museum of Art](#) and chair of the Cultural Institutions Group. "I would say that he has been very supportive even during these latest budgetary problems."

Nicole Gates Anderson is a freelance writer based in Brooklyn.