

A4J's "Special Sauce"

**ART FOR
JUSTICE
FUND**  



A4J Staff LeAnne Alexander, Sue Simon, Terrence Bogans, Amy Holmes, Helena Huang with A4J Founder, Agnes Gund. Photo by Maurice Sartiana

Creative grantmaking is a lot like cooking a great meal. The best ones might start with experienced chefs riffing on traditional family recipes or ones from a favorite cookbook. But it's the fresh ingredients, combination of dishes, artful and unexpected touches, and the company gathered around the table that make a meal truly memorable -- something worth savoring and replicating. As the saying goes, cooking is both art and science. Good philanthropy is much the same.

The Art for Justice Fund (A4J) was designed as a time-limited, spend-down initiative, which ran from 2017 to 2023. Over those six years, it allocated more than \$127 million to 200+ change-makers working to reduce the numbers of people incarcerated in this country and to build a future where shared safety is available to all. Along the way, board and staff were often asked to define not only the Fund's contributions to the field but also its unique style of grantmaking. How did A4J's work add value to the movement to end mass incarceration and influence philanthropic practice? In other words, **What were the elements that defined A4J's approach? What was A4J's "special sauce"?**

This short essay tries to capture key ingredients of our approach for other funders interested in art and cultural approaches to social change.

When A4J began, we relied on many proven grantmaking practices that are important to advance social change. These included prioritizing advocacy and public policy change, accelerating narrative change, and centering the leadership of directly impacted people.

See [Bellwether Survey on Fund's strategy](#) 

These components each proved essential to the success of the Fund and helped produce tangible policy wins in the area of bail reform, sentencing reform and gains in reentry policy and practice. They are described more fully in the *Impact Section* of the A4J archival website. But as the Fund evolved, we took cues from our founding donor, Agnes Gund, her daughter Catherine Gund, and her longtime philanthropic advisor, Sonia Lopez. This core group became a highly active and engaged leadership team. They pushed us to embrace the unique power of art as a tool to shift dominant narratives and expand the role of artists as catalytic change agents in the movement to end mass incarceration. We relied on iteration and learning to improve our grantmaking practice. And most of all, we responded to the needs and requests of grantee partners. These additional “ingredients” contributed to A4J’s impact and are part of its legacy.

The Center for Art & Advocacy, founded by Jesse Krimes and Russell Craig, is the first of its kind fellowship, residency, network for directly impacted artists and their allies launches in June 2023 with a legacy grant from A4J.

WILLINGNESS TO TAKE BIG BETS ON UNLIKELY LEADERS: ARTISTS

As a time-limited fund, we knew there wasn't a moment to waste, and we were eager to accelerate what was, in 2017, a deepening consensus around the need to advance criminal legal reform. While we intended to support organizations at the forefront of advocacy and activism, we also knew we needed to support individual leaders who can often be more nimble than organizations in responding to current events. As a project funded through the sale of art, we embraced artists working across a wide array of mediums as leaders in the movement for change. Initially, we approached our grantmaking fairly conventionally, and established two separate programs to organize the grantmaking. The first and the largest allocation of resources would go to policy advocacy organizations; the second smaller pot would focus on supporting the arts. We soon realized how this siloed approach to grantmaking was, in fact, a significant impediment to the integration of art and advocacy, the very vision we were working to promote. We quickly shifted our approach to embrace art and advocacy as a confluent strategy, and from there our grant dollars flowed holistically.

We began by supporting art programs in prison and writers addressing the carceral system. This work was championed and led by Elizabeth Alexander, an early A4J architect who would soon become the next President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

We funded writers through a fellowship program which supported the completion of such best-selling works as Clint Smith's *How the Word is Passed* (winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award) and Valerie Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (short-listed for the Booker Prize). Haymarket Press launched a new writers' fellowship in 2023, *Writing Freedom*, designed to continue this work with support from A4J and the Mellon Foundation.

As we refined our central strategy of narrative change, we began supporting more individual artists directly. We took inspiration from Mural Arts' pioneering fellowship programs for incarcerated and

formerly incarcerated artists, initially started in 2009, and a residency for artists focused on the carceral system launched by the [Rauschenberg Foundation](#) in 2015. Soze Agency introduced us to Right of Return, a nascent but important fellowship program launched by formerly incarcerated artists Jesse Krimes and Russell Craig. The work of these artists, many of them without formal training, was inspiring and trenchant and, importantly, prioritized the voice of directly impacted people as agents of change.

With advice from a panel of curators and well-known artists, we solicited proposals from a cross-section of artists with an interest in producing work that illuminates the reverberating impacts of mass incarceration. In approaching artists, we asked *how much money do you need to support this project?* The responses fell along race and gender lines. Black women artists requested the least while white male artists asked for the most. Board member Catherine Gund saw this for what it was – internalized inequality – and proposed that A4J disrupt the status quo by funding everyone at the same level of \$100,000. Artists had maximum flexibility as we did not tie support to specific outcomes, and the collective results, including groundbreaking work and solo and group exhibitions, exceeded our wildest expectations.

We went on to support 77 artists with fellowships. These “unlikely leaders” included painters, conceptual artists, musicians, poets, and writers of non-fiction. Nearly 53% were formerly incarcerated, and several are currently in prison. Ultimately, we shifted away from relying solely on professional curators as experts – realizing that A4J-funded artists are closest to new and emerging talent and our best source of information about other candidates.

A4J’s investments provided these artists with the time and space to produce important work, to launch careers in the art world, and to build strong community among themselves. (See *Center for Art & Advocacy*). These artists are creating change in their own lives, in their communities, and in the collective movement to end mass incarceration. Their impact will continue long after A4J is gone.

“This is the first time there has been a push to change the narrative by enabling people to be seen as artists first and formerly incarcerated second.”

A4J Artist



Multi-disciplinary artist Russell Craig at A4J No Justice Without Love Exhibition Opening Night. Photo by Jane Kratochvil, Courtesy Ford Foundation Gallery.

Multi-disciplinary artists Russell Craig and Jesse Krimes. Photo by Maurice Sartiana



Courtesy of A4J Grantee Partner Performing Statistics



Ford Foundation Directors Margaret Morton, Tanya Coke, and A4J Project Director Helena Huang. Photo by Maurice Sartiana.



A4J donor Alexandra Herzan with A4J Board Member Sonia Lopez. Photo by Erin Baiano.



A4J Staff Sue Simon, Advocate Adnan Khan, A4J Board Member Catherine Gund, Ford Foundation Staff Nicole Okai at A4J December 2022 Grantee Partner Convening in Phoenix, Arizona. Photo by Maurice Sartiana.

MOBILIZING A NEW COMMUNITY: ARTISTS, ADVOCATES, ALLIED DONORS

A4J did not start out with the goal of demonstrating that alliances between artists, advocates, and donors could accelerate policy and narrative change to end mass incarceration. Initially, we were almost entirely focused on moving dollars to the movement -- period. Community building between these stakeholders was not an early goal we had set for ourselves.

But the collective work of making social change is iterative, and few people (including grantmakers) can predict how it will evolve or what combination of ingredients will propel it most forcefully. By being too prescriptive, one runs the risk of missing what matters most.

In fact, A4J didn't realize the catalytic power of aligning artists, advocates, and donors until we brought artist- and organization-grantee partners and donors together in New Orleans in late 2018. Many movement-building initiatives bring together advocates and donors; a few bring together artists and donors. But in assembling all three in one place, participants could feel the new possibilities. At this first gathering, we interspersed policy panels with artistic presentations. A devastating performance by Liza Jessie Peterson of an excerpt of "Peculiar Patriot," her Off-Broadway play about the human toll of incarceration, left the audience of 110 people in stunned silence, many in tears. (*Peterson & Catherine Gund of Aubin Pictures would later collaborate to produce a short film based on Peterson's experience performing "Peculiar Patriot" at Angola State Penitentiary, "Angola Do You Hear Us?" This film was shortlisted for an Oscar in 2023.*)

Peterson's performance was a perfect illustration of the way in which art has the power to speak to hearts -- not just minds -- by connecting people emotionally to an issue or community. That openness enabled deeper connections between and among artists, activists, and donors at the gathering and afterward. Prosecutors talked excitedly to poets; lobbyists and organizers began brainstorming with artists about projects they might do together. Funders in the room learned and solidified our commitments, certain that we were seeing the alchemy of art and advocacy at work.

Before leaving NOLA, A4J grantee partners told us they wanted an easy way to stay connected to one another and suggested a listserv. This listserv would become a dynamic source of inspiration, connection, and comfort to the growing community of artists, advocates, and donors. By 2023, more than 350 people participated, many regularly and enthusiastically. The NOLA participants also suggested that A4J establish a responsive funding pool to support collaboration and experimentation between artists and advocates within (and later outside) the A4J community. Grantee partners were clear that the budding relationships between artists and advocates needed opportunities to grow. We listened.

And over the next four years, A4J funded nearly 125 *Art & Advocacy Grants*, supporting an array of projects across the country. We disbursed more than \$4.5M via small grants of \$15,000 to \$50,000, using a simple application process with rolling deadlines. These collaborative projects produced some of the most exciting and imaginative work funded by A4J.

One example:

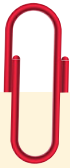
A partnership between MoMA PS1, artist jackie sumell's Solitary Gardens, and the Lower East Side Girls Club created a living installation, "Growing Abolition," which was open to the public from April to October 2022. This collaboration featured a greenhouse in the museum's courtyard, scaled to the footprint of a solitary confinement cell, with a garden planted and tended by members of the Girls Club. The installation transformed a space of confinement into one of healing and possibility while at the same time calling attention to the brutal practice of solitary confinement – one that the United Nations considers human torture and yet affects over 55,000 incarcerated people **on any given day**. Banning the use of solitary confinement is a priority for several A4J-funded state-based campaigns. The installation underscored the urgency of this issue.

As important as the projects themselves, A4J also helped seed a community that built relationships based on trust and sourced collaborations designed by artists and advocates directly impacted by the system they sought to change. The value of such a network was captured by A4J's evaluation partners, Engage R & D, in a Pre & Post Network Analysis – affirming the power of community building as both a key ingredient in and a powerful outcome of the Fund's support. The research demonstrated that such relationships, built on collaboration and transformational rather than transactional relationships, helped advance wins in both policy and narrative change.

See [Community Network Analysis](#) 



Multi-disciplinary artist Maria Gaspar at A4J No Justice Without Love Exhibition Opening Night.
Photo by Jane Kratochvil, Courtesy Ford Foundation Gallery.



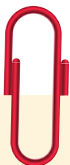
“The cross-collab between people in the movement, especially across the arts/policy divide, in the A4J community has been incredibly significant,” noted one grantee in a sentiment echoed by many.




* A4J supported efforts that resulted in eliminating cash bail in Houston, Texas, Los Angeles, CA, New York State, State of Illinois, preventing thousands of people from languishing in jail because they were too poor to pay bail.

* Juvenile Life Without Parole as a practice was successfully banned in **9 states** with A4J support, contributing to the freedom of over **1000 people** who otherwise would have died in prison but who are now working actively to make our communities safer.

* **Over a dozen visual arts exhibitions** featuring the works of formerly incarcerated artists were mounted with A4J support, including Nicole Fleetwood’s 2020 groundbreaking “Marking Time.” These programs challenged common stereotypes, and many gained national acclaim.



According to Engage R & D survey research, **97% of A4J grantee partners** said the A4J community increased the visibility of the human impact of mass incarceration through art.

See [Engage R & D evaluation reports for more findings](#) 

INVESTING WITH CARE & JOY IN RELATIONSHIPS

A4J Advisory Board member Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, often speaks of the importance of “getting proximate” to people whose lives are entirely unlike our own in order to generate empathy and understanding. A4J’s founder Agnes Gund embodies this practice. After listening to stories about an advocacy campaign that A4J supported, Gund pointed to a photo of a grantee partner with his small child and asked, *How does this policy win improve this child’s life?* People and policy become an A4J mantra. Agnes and Catherine Gund attended every grantee partner convening and most site visits. They informed and reviewed each grant recommendation – more than 450 – and developed lasting friendships with grantee partners. Their commitment to showing up created a caring culture for all the Fund’s activities.

Staff also embraced this ethos of connectivity and worked closely with our community members. And although we did not always get it right, when the global pandemic hit, the personal connections established with many grantee partners allowed us to respond quickly to people’s needs during that devastating time. Among other responses, we offered wellness stipends that covered physical therapy, yoga, meditation, counseling, and educational opportunities to any grantee partner who applied.

Other “people-centered” approaches included simplifying funding applications; offering technical assistance to prospective grantees to craft their artist statements; providing emergency grants; and hosting meaningful and restorative in-person convenings (NOLA, 2018, Phoenix 2022) to inspire collaboration and fortify relationships among artists, advocates, and allied donors.

We recognized the acute need for beauty and joy, care, and rest in a community with high rates of trauma and financial instability, and with support from our founder, worked to respond as we would for family and friends.



Women's Community Justice Association rally at City Hall to close Rikers, February 2021.
Photos by Jennifer S. Altman.



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Multi-disciplinary artist Halim Flowers at A4J No Justice Without Love Exhibition Opening Night. Photo by Jane Kratochvil, Courtesy Ford Foundation Gallery.

TURNING ART INTO JUSTICE: A MODEL FOR LEVERAGING RESOURCES

A4J was started when philanthropist and arts patron Agnes Gund sold her favorite painting to create a fund to transform the criminal legal system. Gund was moved to action by three powerful works of non-fiction storytelling: Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, and Ava Duvernay's documentary film *13th*. Her impact could have been limited to the distribution of the \$100M she gave to launch the Fund.

But Gund wanted to leverage her gift to attract additional contributions and more partners to the movement to end mass incarceration.

A4J committed to fundraising and a communications effort that raised the visibility of Gund's inspiring leadership and invited others to follow suit. Ford Foundation president Darren Walker was an early and enthusiastic supporter. Ford's commitment to cover all staff / administrative costs for the life of the Fund further encouraged donors to give generously, with the assurance that 100% of their donations would be allocated directly to grantee partners. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors provided fiscal sponsorship and a flexible vehicle to manage the Fund's resources.

Artists are notoriously generous and are regularly asked to donate their work in support of myriad causes. As a long time collector, Gund understood this and determined that A4J would never solicit works directly from artists to benefit the Fund. Instead, we focused on telling the Fund's origin story (securing over 178 media stories as of November 2023) and inviting other donors to invest.

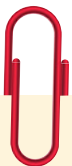
[See Media Brief](#) 

We focused on working quickly to demonstrate “proof of concept” -- aggregating and elevating the outcomes we hoped would inspire others to step up and support the cause. A4J secured an additional \$27M from more than 300 individuals, art organizations, galleries, and small businesses.

Several generous collectors sold artwork and donated the proceeds. Other gifts ranged from a \$20 cash donation from a person currently incarcerated to a \$5M gift from MacKenzie Scott. Without solicitation, a dozen artists came forward to contribute to A4J – either by selling work and donating proceeds or via other kinds of contributions. They included Mark Bradford, who donated the proceeds from the sale of 25 prints of *Life Size* (2019), commissioned by LA Frieize, that raised over \$1M; and the Artsy/Marian Goodman Gallery online auction of Julie Mehretu’s painting, *Dissident Score* (2019-21), which raised \$6.5M for A4J – a sales record for Mehretu at the time. We received inspiring contributions through partnerships with I.a. Eyeworks, the graffiti artist Futura, Paula Crown’s Atelier, and EXPO Chicago, demonstrating the power of what’s possible when art is leveraged into justice.

We allocated both 501c3 and 501c4 funds which robustly supported more than 200 recipients, including national and local advocacy organizations, prosecutors’ offices, cultural institutions and other movement groups as well as lawyers, organizers, campaign strategists, writers, visual artists, musicians and so many others – all united in their commitment to disrupt the criminal legal system and repair the harm.

A4J also offered grantee partners fundraising support: our staff organized donor briefings and special events, created media materials on their behalf, provided fundraising training, sponsored gallery shows, offered technical assistance to those applying for fellowships and residencies, and facilitated introductions to new donors. In our last year, staff worked directly with a group of core grantee partners to raise funds to match their final grants from A4J, resulting in more than \$12 M in new dollars leveraged that year alone.



Research surveys conducted by Engage R & D indicated that

* **94% of grantee partners** reported the A4J Network help attract new donors to the movement to end mass incarceration; and

* **71% of A4J artists** reported the Network helped them attract new funding for their work.



Incarcerated Children’s Advocacy Network Members Kaleem Nazeem and Kempis “Ghani” Songster at A4J Closing Event, June 2023. Photo by Erin Baiano.



Multi-disciplinary artist Paul Rucker plays his cello at A4J December 2022 Grantee Partner Convening in Phoenix, Arizona. Photo by Maurice Sartiana.





A4J Board Members Catherine Gund, Agnes Gund, Darren Walker with Florida Rights Restoration Coalition's Founder and Executive Director, Desmond Meade at A4J Closing Event June 2023. Photo by Erin Baiano.

IN THE KITCHEN: LOVE AND INTENTIONALITY

One can have all the best intentions and a big budget, yet still fail to create something memorable and meaningful enough to influence the practice of others. Without two other essential ingredients – love and intentionality – A4J would have failed to capture people’s imaginations, radically expand our collective sense of possibility, and build lasting momentum for change.

A4J had the privilege of working closely with artists, writers, advocates, and allied donors who lead with compassion and wisdom – some after surviving unthinkable deprivation and abuse by the criminal legal system. On a daily basis, they reminded us of what is truly important and required to do this work. They inspired us to work with love and intentionality when building an interactive community of grantees, investing in their wellbeing, and providing ample opportunities for growth and collaboration.

When Agnes Gund tapped Daisy Desrosiers, Director of the Gund Gallery at Kenyon College, to curate A4J’s culminating art exhibition at the Ford Foundation Gallery (April – June 2023), we titled the show *No Justice Without Love*, after a billboard created by For Freedoms artist Jimmy Wu. Love and intentionality were evident in every aspect of curation and programming of the show, and despite its heavy content, helped to draw more than 6,000 visitors from around the world – more than any other Ford Gallery exhibition to date. It was also why the show generated significant press attention, including this thoughtful article by Seph Rodney in Hypoallergic, [*At the Root of Justice are Different Kinds of Love*](#), June 2023.

Like cooking, good philanthropy is both science and art. At A4J, we started with science — the core ingredients of a sound strategy, significant resources, and talented advocates to advance change. But it was the artful additions to that recipe – mobilizing artists, often in collaboration with

advocates; a nimble and evolutionary approach to grant making and communications; personalized care for our partners; and the love and intention our partners brought to the table – that made the difference. This is what defined A4J’s special sauce.

We believe this initiative fed the movement to end mass incarceration in timely and important ways and we hope it will inspire other artful — and impactful — efforts going forward.

Helena Huang
Project Director

Fall 2023



Celebrating A4J’s Founder Agnes Gund at A4J Closing Event, June 2023.
Photo by Erin Baiano.



Multi-disciplinary artist Jared Owens at A4J No Justice Without Love Exhibition Opening Night. Photo by Jane Kratochvil, Courtesy Ford Foundation Gallery.



- * **prioritizing** advocacy and public policy change
- * **accelerating** narrative change
- * **centering** the leadership of directly impacted people
- * **willingness to take** big bets on “unlikely” leaders: artists
- * **mobilizing** a new community: artists, advocates, allied donors
- * **investing** with care & joy in relationships
- * **turning** art into justice: a model for leveraging resources
- * adding the essential ingredients

**love and
intentionality**





Right of Return Fellows at A4J December 2022 Grantee Partner Convening in Phoenix, Arizona.
Photo by Maurice Sartiana.

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