Amid a Lack of Support, This Funding Collaborative Backs Jewish Arts and Culture

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It's been almost seven years since the National Foundation for Jewish Culture ceased operations. The closure of NFJC, which had been supporting Jewish
artists, writers, filmmakers, musicians and scholars since 1961, signified what many in the creative community were already painfully aware of: Philanthropists were not supporting Jewish arts and culture as they had in the past.

These developments alarmed Lou Cove, a senior advisor to the Harold Grinspoon Foundation and founder of CANVAS, a Jewish Funders Network (JFN) collaborative that aims to create a 21st-century Jewish arts and culture renaissance. CANVAS launched in September 2019 and began making its first grants in March 2020, just as COVID-19 arrived in the United States.

CANVAS was formed after Cove’s discussions with colleagues in the Jewish philanthropy field led to the publication of two reports, underwritten by Steven Spielberg’s Righteous Persons Foundation (RPF) and published by JFN, that looked at the state of the field. The first, “Devising Strategies to Support Arts & Culture,” presented findings from conversations with four focus groups who were asked to consider topics like “why Jewish arts and culture matter,” “trends influencing Jewish arts and culture funding,” “barriers to increasing support” and “strategies for increasing support.”

The second report, “Cross-Section: A Look at Jewish Arts and Culture in North America Today Through the Lens of Artists and Arts Organizations,” which was released in 2018, found that the field needed to take particular steps to reinvigorate itself.

“The set of recommendations that came out of the second report ultimately became CANVAS,” Cove said.
“We looked at the field and said, ‘What makes up a healthy ecosystem for artists, and how can we support that?’” Cove oversaw the process of forming CANVAS alongside Rachel Levin, the former executive director of RPF; Shayna Rose Triebwasser, RPF’s current executive director; and Tzivia Schwartz Getzug, director of the West Coast office of JFN. Prior to his current roles, Cove was the executive director of Reboot, a think tank and incubator for modern Jewish culture, as well as vice president of the National Yiddish Book Center.

“We all agreed there were three very important components to a healthy ecosystem,” Cove said. “Number one is networks, networks of artists and arts organizations that allow one another to find each other, to advance their careers, to cross-pollinate ideas. The second is distribution channels—how does the work actually get to the audience? That can be investing in online digital platforms, it could be museums, it could be publishing houses, it could be streaming services, it could be film festivals. That’s something that we’re researching now. The third is media coverage of the field, because you don’t know to go see it, watch it, hear it, attend it if you weren’t told there’s something going on.”

CANVAS recently made its first round of grants to media grantees—$253,000 distributed between The Forward, an American Jewish publication with roots dating back to the late 19th century; Alma, a Jewish publication owned by 70 Faces Media and launched in 2017; and Hyperallergic, a secular arts publication founded in 2009.
Currently, CANVAS has seven major funding partners and additional funders contributing at lower levels. RPF is the primary vehicle through which Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw have funded Jewish causes, social justice and other issues to the tune of over $100 million. Other funding partners include the Jim Joseph Foundation, which funds Jewish arts and culture through grantees like the Harold Grinspoon PJ Library Alliance, the Contemporary Jewish Museum in San Francisco; the Klarman Family Fund, which supports Israel, the global Jewish community and secular causes; and the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Foundation, which promotes the arts and humanities through its support of the Cooper Hewitt Design Museum, the Cleveland Museum of Art and others.

There’s also the Peleh Fund, which gives to children’s education and funds the Peleh Residency program for artists; the Howard and Geraldine Polinger Family Foundation, which supports performing arts programs such as the Arts Forward Fund and the Kennedy Center; and the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies, which supports the Israel Museum, Oklahoma’s Circle Cinema Foundation and the Tulsa Ballet, among many others.

RPF’s Triebwasser says CANVAS resonated with her organization because RPF believes in the power of art and storytelling. “Over time, we’ve supported works from many disciplines. We’ve supported documentary film, art exhibitions and networks that are bringing together artists,” she said.

Triebwasser says support for Jewish arts and culture is important for a variety of reasons. “The arts entertain
us, but they do so much more. They help bring beauty and meaning into our lives. They educate us about the world around us, they connect us to people whose lives are different than our own and they engage us in social justice issues. There’s no question that arts and culture are essential to our lives and they deserve to have support.”

Cove believes that point has been lost in the shuffle, particularly during the pandemic, which has made funding for Jewish arts and culture even more challenging. He says COVID-19 has had a “devastating impact” on artists “at a moment where we are all leaning so heavily on our creatives to entertain us, distract us, help us process a pandemic. It’s kind of ironic, but that’s what’s happening.”

CANVAS recently released $180,000 in emergency relief to artists economically affected by the pandemic. He says CANVAS plans to provide additional relief funding in 2021 and is hopeful that other funders will join the effort.

Cove believes the problem with funding arts and culture, especially now, is that “funders get into a binary mindset. I’m either helping to feed and clothe people or I’m helping to make new creativity,” he said. “And I have to choose, and especially in a time when there’s a pandemic going on, that choice for many people seems quite obvious. I want to help get vaccines to people. I want to help house the homeless. I want to make sure food insecurity is taken care of.”

Nevertheless, Cove believes that support for arts and culture can’t be separated from the fulfillment of basic human needs. That’s one of the messages of one
CANVAS 2020–2021 grantee, an exhibition called “Dwelling in a Time of Plagues,” which is a project of the Council of American Jewish Museums (CAJM).

Melissa Martens Yaverbaum, a former curator and current executive director of CAJM, came up with the idea for the two-phase project. The first phase launched in fall 2020, coinciding with the Jewish holiday Sukkot. The next phase commenced online and with installations at six Jewish museums around the country in time for Passover in 2021.

“Last year, as we were getting close to the [Jewish High] holidays, we thought, we need a way of acknowledging the holidays in new configurations,” Martens Yaverbaum said. “We wondered, how can Jewish creatives and Jewish organizations leverage outside and digital spaces to launch new creative content?”

During Sukkot, a week-long harvest celebration in which people build temporary shelters where they eat and socialize, “We think a lot about shelter, immigration, racial justice and who’s an insider and who’s an outsider,” Martens Yaverbaum said. “During Passover [a holiday that deals with themes of freedom], we think about the plagues, what plagues us and what will liberate us.”

According to Cove, the exhibition “identifies some of the social ills—racism, food insecurity, housing insecurity and binary thinking. [When you see the exhibition], you start to remember—oh, it’s the artists and the creatives that help us connect to these issues, that help bring these issues to the forefront, that help
spark our imagination and make us care about these issues and want to take care of them,” he said.

Going forward, Cove would like to see CANVAS invest in public art projects after the manner of the New Deal-era Works Progress Administration, projects that create paid employment for artists, link them with social services in their communities, and intertwine their creative output and energy with the social and educational goals of the organizations they serve.

“I think that will make for a much more vibrant and energized community,” Cove said. “And hopefully for the Jewish community, it’ll have more of a lasting impact. Doing something like that can remind us all, and remind us in the philanthropic community, that we’re stronger when we work in concert with one another.”