



# CREATIVE STRATEGIST PROGRAM EVALUATION

DECEMBER 2021

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Part 2 of 4





Artist Deborah Aschheim sketched voters as part of a #365DaysOfVoters social media campaign for the Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk.

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*Creative strategist Deborah Aschheim talks with students at Cal State Dominguez Hills.*

# EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluator was embedded in the Creative Strategist program as a “Cross Sector Analyst,” serving as both support to the Cross Sector Manager as the program was designed and implemented, and as a program evaluator. The department intentionally assigned one person to hold both responsibilities in order to create informal feedback loops that would allow the program to be adjusted and improved in real time, rather than waiting for a formal evaluation report. This also reflected Arts and Culture’s early recognition that the complexity of the Creative Strategist program required more than a single person to design, implement, and manage it effectively.

Data collection for the evaluation was both formal and informal. Most data collection for the evaluation was integrated into program activities, and included all of the following:

- **Participant observation** took place in cohort meetings, as well as participation in program activities and events led by the creative strategists.
- **Bi-weekly check-ins with creative strategists** were conducted every other week by phone to discuss project progress. This was an opportunity for creative strategists to identify any needs as well as strategize and troubleshoot challenges or program obstacles.
- **Monthly check-ins with department connectors** occurred once a month by phone to get updates and identify any connector or department needs for making the residencies successful.
- **Monthly creative strategist reports** were submitted in writing every other week at the start of the residency, reporting on progress, sharing key questions, findings, and activities. Check-in calls by phone were often more informative, so these reports became less instrumental and were eventually phased out.
- **Cohort meetings** took place quarterly with all creative strategists and department connectors, as a peer learning opportunity where residency needs, challenges, and progress were shared.
- **Exit interviews** were conducted with each creative strategist and department connector at the end of the residencies.



## Evaluator's statement of positionality

I was actively engaged in the inner workings of the program and experienced first-hand the frustrations, successes, and growing pains. I built personal relationships with the creative strategists, department connectors, and Arts and Culture staff. In my regularly scheduled conversations with creative strategists, the line between troubleshooting and data collection were blurred. As a result, a certain amount of “objectivity” often expected from evaluators was lost. This report, I believe, demonstrates that the benefits of this approach outweigh the apparent costs.

My role in management and administration evolved over time in response to staffing changes. As improvements were made to the program based on what we were learning, my responsibilities at first expanded. Then, when Pauline Kamiyama left the department in July 2019, I was briefly asked to manage the program. When a full-time Cross Sector Manager was hired and onboarded in December 2019, I stepped back to work almost exclusively on the evaluation, and my primary focus was the creative strategists.

I came to the department on a two-year placement as a Mellon/American Council of Learned Societies Public Fellow. I drew from my training in cultural studies, as well as my field work experience in participant observation. The women of color, feminist traditions, and radical theorists that have framed my own activism throughout my life and my graduate experience informed both my administrative and evaluator perspectives. For me, one of the things that ties these areas together is the idea that “objectivity,”

in many ways, is a social construction. To fully understand history and unpack the idea of objectivity, we must look to the silences, breaks, and ruptures in official narratives as launching points for research and investigation. This evaluation was an opportunity to apply these ideas in practice.

It is my view that government institutions have historically operated on a belief in their own neutrality and objectivity, considering themselves a representative entity reflective of the diversity of the political landscape. Most of these first six residencies came to a close as the COVID-19 pandemic was announced and closures began, but the writing of this report continued as the political ruptures of 2020 – nationwide protests against police brutality and the inequitable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities of color and working class people – provided clarity into the effect of long-standing unequal distribution of wealth and resources and the underlying history of white supremacy that many of our institutions, including government, were built on. In this context, taking a position of being “neutral” or “objective” is a choice that takes the side of the status quo.

Because of the time period covered by the evaluation and writing of this report, it does not take into account actions taken by LA County in the wake of events of 2020, including voter-approved Care First Community Investment programs (formerly referred to as Measure J), which allocates at least 10% of the County’s locally generated, unrestricted funding to address racial injustice through community investments,<sup>36</sup> passage of LA County’s first-ever Countywide Cultural Policy,<sup>37</sup> and the Board-adopted Anti-Racism, Diversity and Inclusion (ARDI) Initiative.<sup>38</sup>

This evaluation draws in particular on Lithgow and Wall's *Embedded Aesthetics: Artist-in-Residencies as Sites of Discursive Struggle and Social Innovation*. They argue that artist residencies in government produce "productive frictions," which are, "Activities, practices and events which run counter to the explicit organizational goals of efficiency, but which in the end are productive in unexpected ways."<sup>39</sup>

They further state that, "Productive frictions reflect the discovery of resources for new experiences, the creation of new experiences, and the making visible of previously obscured or invisible experiences."<sup>40</sup> In this sense, they say, artist residencies in municipal governments can make visible normalized structures that have for long become commonplace to an extent they are considered natural. This visiblizing process often brings out a productive friction that has the potential to offer a world of transformative possibilities. Thus, these residencies and this evaluation can be seen as interventions in the idea of objectivity.

**Productive frictions appeared throughout these residencies.** From its inception, the Creative Strategist program was built on the possibility of shifting departmental cultures and approaches to equity from ostensibly objective outputs and outcomes to innovative and artistic processes. In my role as program staff, I often found myself listening to many needs and points of view, productive frictions that I sought to hold in a generative or transformative way. This process deeply informed both my role as program staff and as evaluator.

— **Robin Garcia**

*Cross Sector Analyst,  
Mellon/ACLS Public Fellow*

## Individuals Interviewed

- Jean Armbruster, Director, Department of Public Health PLACE Program
- Deborah Aschheim, Creative Strategist, LA County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk
- Angel Baker, Division Chief, Program Development, Department of Mental Health
- Leticia Buckley, former Interim Director, LA County Arts Commission
- Sandra de la Loza, Creative Strategist, Department of Parks and Recreation
- Clement Hanami, Creative Strategist, Department of Public Health PLACE Program
- Pauline Kanako Kamiyama, former Deputy Director of Civic Art
- Olga Koumoundouros, Creative Strategist, Department of Public Health Office of Violence Prevention
- Alan Nakagawa, Creative Strategist, LA County Library
- Faith Parducho, Special Assistant to the Chief Deputy Director, Department of Parks and Recreation
- Mike Sanchez, Media and Communications, LA County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk
- Elaine Waldman, Health Program Analyst III, Department of Mental Health
- Christiane Warburton, Assistant Library Administrator, LA County Library
- Andrea Welsing, Director, Department of Public Health Office of Violence Prevention
- Anu Yadav, Creative Strategist, Department of Mental Health

**WALK TO  
EMPOWER.**

- Identify your skills, strength, allies (friends, family, plants).
- Affirm what you do know, your inner fire, your gifts.

*Sandra de la Loza's Walk for Wellness at Earvin "Magic" Johnson Park.*





# ENDNOTES

- 36** County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office. *Alternatives to Incarceration Initiative*. Accessed June 11, 2021. <https://ceo.lacounty.gov/measure-j-background>.
- 37** Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture. *Countywide Cultural Policy*. Accessed August 23, 2021. <https://www.lacountyarts.org/CEIICulturalPolicy>.
- 38** County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office. *Anti-Racism, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiative*. Accessed June 11, 2021. <https://ceo.lacounty.gov/antiracism>.
- 39** Lithgow, Michael and Karen Wall, "Embedded Aesthetics: Artist-in-Residencies as Sites of Discursive Struggle and Social Innovation." *Seismopolite* 19 (2017), <http://www.seismopolite.com/embedded-aesthetics-artist-in-residencies-as-sites-of-discursive-struggle-and-social-innovation>.
- 40** Lithgow and Wall, 2017.



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