Closer
evaluation by Michael Johnson

CREATIVE EXCHANGE
POWERED BY SPRINGBOARD FOR THE ARTS
Introduction

In 2014, Springboard for the Arts was faced with a question – How do we grow our work and support more artists across the country while staying grounded in our work as an artist-led organization based in Minnesota? We had deep experience building resources and professional development for artists to make a living and a life. We knew we wanted this kind of infrastructure for artists all across the country. We had created a toolkit for our Community Supported Art program that had seen quick uptake and replication. We had seen how people could take a practical resource and make something happen in their community without having to re-invent the wheel.

Those seeds are what we planted with Creative Exchange, an experiment in storytelling and resource-sharing. We wanted to share stories that would connect people, that would uplift creative work happening in communities and inspire others to action. We thought that if we could share the practical toolkits from our programs, and collect and commission other toolkits, that would create more opportunities for artists and communities to work together. We kept our grounding by saying that in Minnesota we did things, and through Creative Exchange, we could make things happen nationally.
Over 400 stories and features, and more than 12,000 toolkit downloads later, we’ve learned and grown so much through this experiment. We know that people are hungry for creativity, opportunity, and community. We’ve seen how highlighting artists in deep and thoughtful ways can make them feel seen and validated, and spur on greater visibility. We’ve seen program replications and adaptations from small postcard projects to large-scale creative placemaking work. We also know that toolkits and stories are not always enough by themselves to spark change – being in direct contact, providing in-person context and guidance, and patience as ideas germinate and bloom have been a key part of this work.

Over the years we have added in-person trainings to our national work, and grown our national convening opportunities like the Rural Arts & Culture Summit. We have been able to be a part of convenings, projects, and consulting work, and cheered on colleagues doing the same. Each project has helped refine and expand the tools presented here – different approaches to community engagement and involvement, clearer focus on equity in practice, more ideas about how to do the work. And we need more, because there is so much work to do. It is heartening to see more toolkits and sharing resources appear over these past few years, both as a way to get work out, and make more possible.
In 2020, having readily available resources and toolkits has been critical to our work as a creative and arts sector responding to the twin crises of the pandemic and the fight for racial justice. Springboard has had a long-running Emergency Relief Fund, and as we ramped up that work in March of 2020, our muscle for making toolkits developed through Creative Exchange kicked in and we produced a field guide for others. That resource has been downloaded over 600 times this year, over 150 leaders from across the country have joined the information and resource-sharing calls around Emergency Relief Funds, and we have inspired replications and adaptations across the country.

In August 2020 (after this survey was completed) we launched A Handbook for Artists Working in Community as a tool for artists who want to do community engaged work. In three months, the Handbook has been downloaded over 1,200 times, showing the need for more resources and support for artists, creative workers, and culture bearers to lead community change. Sharing freely has always been at the core of Creative Exchange, and it is clear that in a time of crisis that the more we could share, the more we could respond together, and build towards a more creative and just future.
There are so many people to thank for making this work happen. The artists and organizations who have trusted us to share their work and their stories, and everyone who has created toolkits and allowed us to share them on Creative Exchange are all inspirations. Going through these archives is a reminder of the constant drive and ingenuity of people working to make their communities more connected and creative.

Thanks to the funders who have supported this work over the years, from launching the platform, to bringing people together, to funding toolkits – the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation, the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation, the Mardag Foundation, and the Bush Foundation.

The writers who put these stories together and shared their insights and inspirations have been a joy to work with, especially Nicole Rupersburg, who wrote so many features. And as always, thanks to the staff of artists and organizers at Springboard for the Arts who keep on finding new ways to create and share.

Carl Atiya Swanson
Associate Director, Operations & Communications
Springboard for the Arts
you are not alone
Closer.

It seemed a fitting name for this evaluative report. A single word with several meanings. As a noun, closer represents the last part of a performance, collection, or series. I hope it serves as a fitting bow for everyone who has been close to this work over the past six years. I also hope that it conveys the powerful ways that Creative Exchange has gotten readers closer to creativity, closer to opportunity, and closer to their community.

My evaluative report draws from survey data, social media scans, document review, and interviews with a few featured artists as well as Creative Exchange’s primary editor, Nicole Rupersburg. In this report, I will strive to get us closer to understanding the individual and collective impact of Creative Exchange. Although we are limited to a small sampling size, several significant patterns did emerge in my analysis. My conclusions of the possible impact of Creative Exchange will be discussed through three interpretive groupings.

The three groupings include:
1) Creativity, 2) Opportunity, and 3) Community.
impact on the editor

When I set out to assess the impact of Creative Exchange, I started by interviewing the Creative Exchange's long-time editor, Nicole Rupersburg. Nicole began writing artist profiles for the website in 2014. I asked Nicole to pose a question to the artists and to the site's readers:

“A burning question for me...did you feel like this work was important? Did you feel like this work had value? It did for me and I really hope that it did for you.”

Rupersburg went on to share that as a freelance writer she has often felt alone. For her, the site has been an antidote to loneliness and a way to put out some good into the world:

“The impact has been very personal...there were times in these last several years that doing this project reinvigorated me in ways that I did not anticipate. If I was having a low point as a freelance worker and asking myself if anything mattered or was important, talking to artists made me feel like the work had value...over the years I have gotten feedback from people about how the profile gave them visibility and was a nice representation of their work. A lot of artists haven’t had any media coverage before. And these profiles were not normal. They were extremley in-depth. I didn’t want to write another puff piece. I wanted people to read a 2,500 word profile on an artist and actually get something out of it...if there is a person curious about community-based art programs, Creative Exchange is truly a one stop resource.”
About the survey

In addition to learning from Nicole Rupersburg and the folks at Springboard for the Arts about their intentions for Creative Exchange, survey results from 23 participants captured throughout the Spring of 2020 provided valuable information about how people are engaging with the site and what, if any, impact it’s had on them, their work, and their communities over the past six years.

Creative Exchange
April 16

With toolkits and a deep story archive, there is lots to be inspired by on Creative Exchange. Take a moment to fill out our survey and let us know what’s working for you!

https://springboardexchange.org/creative-exchange-survey/
What kind of content, resources, or themes would you like to see on Creative Exchange in the future?

Survey respondents expressed interest in a continuation of artist interviews to inspire them and help them to see what’s possible for initiating and sustaining creative projects in their own community. Through stories from different geographies, modeling equity and inclusivity, they want to get closer to creativity.

They also would like a continuation of toolkits, an increase in advocacy information, and greater access to financial and educational resources that give them the capacity and confidence to do the work on their own and in ways that are more sustainable. They want to get closer to opportunity.

Finally, they expressed an interest in getting closer to community and modeling equity, inclusion, and accessibility in their work. They identified a desire for an affinity network that supports them. In-person gatherings were also identified by several people as being valuable.
To what extent has Creative Exchange inspired you? Tell us more about what, if any, impact Creative Exchange has had on you, your work, and your community?

Q.

“Just reading this survey makes me realize there is so much more I wish I had time to research and develop. But the days are full. It’s good to know you are out there. I appreciate the Creative Placemaking work and so much more of the ethos behind your organization.”
- survey respondent

“Supervised by two cats, I make art in a room all by myself. Knowing that there are artists outside my living room, making art their own way, creating new images and exploring new themes, inspires me to keep going. I am grateful everyday to know that I am not alone.”
- survey respondent
To what extent does Creative Exchange increase your awareness of other arts and community-based work or make you feel a part of something bigger than yourself?

81% positive

“I think it's a great collection of community-minded artists that would be hard to find otherwise (because they're so busy doing the work!).”
- survey respondent

“It shows what others are doing. I like best practices and being able to show people what is possible.”
- survey respondent

“Knowing that there are artists in the world, making art, making change, making communities, is inspiration.”
- survey respondent

survey response themes

+ makes creative work more visible
+ great collection of diverse work
+ platform help people see themselves
+ reduces stress
+ makes work feel more doable
+ helps demonstrate impact to others
+ tool for arts advocacy
+ not feeling alone
impact on readers

Nearly three-fourths of survey respondents (74%) were inspired to take some kind of action (with their own arts practice or community) because of engaging in some way with Creative Exchange.

The majority of survey respondents were comfortable sharing or referring toolkit materials but very few went on to directly replicate (or recall doing so) in projects of their own. The Bunnell Street Arts Center has been operating a Community Supported Art project for three years and credits Creative Exchange for getting started. It is one of over 70 CSA replications across the United States since 2011.

As of November 2020, the most frequently downloaded toolkits are:
+ Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists
+ A Handbook for Artists Working in Community
+ Irrigate: Artist-led Creative Placemaking
+ Guide for Business Districts to Work with Local Artists
impact on featured artists

In addition to conducting a survey, we reached out to several artists who have had their work profiled on Creative Exchange. Zach DeBoer and Shel Neymark both spoke highly of Creative Exchange and credit their experience with getting them closer to creativity, opportunity, and community.

“I have used the various Creative Toolkits as reference guides for some of the work I do. The interview has also been a valuable press piece that I can share to attract more projects...I loved reading all the other stories about artists doing community-based work and seeing the wide variety of mediums/areas they were creating their work in. It was great seeing that there are other artists doing this sort of work. Yes, I felt like I was a part of a movement of artists doing very important work.”
- Zach DeBoer

“The biggest impact was writing the toolkit. They gave me a form and template to do it..I am so indebted to Springboard for providing me the toolkit structure. It made the process so much easier.”
- Shel Neymark
Appendix of Toolkits

500 Plates
Gather community with a large-scale meal, inspired by a project in Akron with a toolkit from artist Hunter Franks.
https://springboardexchange.org/500-plates-toolkit/

Artist Health Fair
Use this toolkit to create a public fair to connect your community to health resources, based on projects from Springboard for the Arts.
https://springboardexchange.org/artistshealthfair/

Artist-Designed Bike Rack Toolkit
Commission creative bike racks and partner artists with fabricators with this toolkit from a program by Metro Arts in Nashville.
https://springboardexchange.org/artist-designed-bike-rack-toolkit/

Block Party in a Box
Create a block party for your neighborhood with this toolkit of templates for invitations and planning from urbanist Kevin Van Lierop.
https://springboardexchange.org/blockpartyinabox/

Creative People Power
Reimagine creative community development with the new framework for engagement and building thriving communities from Springboard for the Arts and Helicon Collaborative.
https://springboardexchange.org/creative-people-power/

Community Supported Art
Connect artists to buyers with this creative commissioning project based on Community Supported Agriculture from Springboard for the Arts.
https://springboardexchange.org/communitysupportedart/
Emergency Relief Funds Toolkit
Establish an Emergency Relief Fund to support artists in your community, with this toolkit modeled on the Personal Emergency Relief Fund from Springboard for the Arts.
https://springboardexchange.org/emergency-relief-funds-toolkit/

Find an Artist Toolkit
A practical resource for ethically and transparently creating artist calls and commissions from Springboard for the Arts.
https://springboardexchange.org/find-an-artist-toolkit/

[freespace]
Imagine open community space and programming, with this toolkit inspired by the San Francisco [freespace] project.
https://springboardexchange.org/freespace/

Growing Up in the Art Toolkit
Plan arts programming and creative partnerships for youth, based on programming from the Springfield Regional Arts Council.
https://springboardexchange.org/growing-up-in-the-arts-toolkit/

Guide for Business Districts to Work with Artists
A toolkit of ideas and templates for business districts to partner with artists on creative placemaking projects, from Springboard for the Arts with International Downtown Association and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Handbook for Artists Working in Community
A toolkit of practical exercises and planning resources for artists looking to start or deepen their work in community, from Springboard for the Arts with the National Endowment for the Arts.
https://springboardexchange.org/artists-working-in-community/
HE-HO: A Toolkit for Health and Housing Resources
Inspired by a program of the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, connect your community to health and housing resources with this toolkit of templates and ideas.
https://springboardexchange.org/he-ho-toolkit/

Healthcare Voucher & Free Healthcare Days
Learn about connecting artists to health resources and access to community health clinics with this toolkit from Springboard for the Arts.
https://springboardexchange.org/healthcaretoolkit/

HOMAGO Toolkit
Create programming for youth to Hang Out, Mess Around, Geek Out in this toolkit for self-directed learning from Yollocalli Arts Reach in Chicago.
https://springboardexchange.org/homago-toolkit/

Irrigate
This toolkit shares artist-led creative placemaking projects, partnering artists and local businesses, from Springboard for the Arts.
https://springboardexchange.org/irrigate/

Lightning Rod Toolkit
Create topical, critical theater based on current events, with this co-creation model established by Lightning Rod in Minneapolis.
https://springboardexchange.org/lightning-rod-toolkit/

Mural Arts’ Porch Light Toolkit
Create a program using murals for community-based healing and engagement with this toolkit from the Porch Light program in Philadelphia.
https://springboardexchange.org/porch-light-toolkit/

Mural Map & Community History Toolkit
Based on a mapping and ceramics project, document community history with this toolkit from artist Shel Neymark.
https://springboardexchange.org/mural-map-community-history-toolkit/
Neighborhood Postcard Project
Share stories from community members and neighborhood identity with this playful, engaging toolkit from artist Hunter Franks.
https://springboardexchange.org/postcardproject/

Non-Profit Gallery Toolkit
Plan and run a non-profit arts gallery with this toolkit of guidance and templates from the Macon Arts Alliance.
https://springboardexchange.org/non-profit-gallery-toolkit/

Open-air Social Dance Series
Create public dance programming and community dance opportunities with this toolkit from Chicago's SummerDance program.
https://springboardexchange.org/socialdanceseries/

Pop Up Museum
Invite community members to share stories and history with this toolkit for temporary themed museum exhibitions from the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History.
https://springboardexchange.org/popupmuseum/

Ready Go Toolkit
Connect mobile artist projects to community events with this toolkit inspired by Springboard for the Arts’ Ready Go roster.
https://springboardexchange.org/ready-go-toolkit/

The People’s Creative Toolkit
Create campaign graphics and narratives with impact, inspired by labor organizing, with this toolkit from Rogue Citizen and SEIU Local 26.
https://springboardexchange.org/peoples-creative-toolkit/

The Road to a Community Plan
A toolkit for community engagement and planning from the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota.
https://springboardexchange.org/roadtocommunityplan/
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Toolkit Toolkit</th>
<th>A resource for thinking about sharing your project and creating a toolkit based on your work from Springboard for the Arts.</th>
<th><a href="https://springboardexchange.org/toolkit-toolkit/">https://springboardexchange.org/toolkit-toolkit/</a></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trabajo de Arte: Aprotones de Negocios para Artistas</td>
<td>A Spanish-language translation of the Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists toolkit from Springboard for the Arts, created in partnership with Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana in San Jose.</td>
<td><a href="https://springboardexchange.org/trabajo-de-arte/">https://springboardexchange.org/trabajo-de-arte/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wanderway</td>
<td>Create meaningful engagement with social media and narrative storytelling with this unique guided toolkit experience.</td>
<td><a href="https://springboardexchange.org/wanderway/">https://springboardexchange.org/wanderway/</a></td>
</tr>
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<td>Work of Art: Business Skills for Artists</td>
<td>Developed by Springboard for the Arts, this toolkit provides practical knowledge for artists on necessary business skills for making a living and a life.</td>
<td><a href="https://springboardexchange.org/workofart/">https://springboardexchange.org/workofart/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>World Dance Party</td>
<td>Help neighbors and community members get to know each other through the exchange of food and traditional dance with this toolkit from Seattle’s World Dance.</td>
<td><a href="https://springboardexchange.org/worlddanceparty/">https://springboardexchange.org/worlddanceparty/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Write Denver Toolkit</td>
<td>Share public poetry and writing events to bring out community stories and build creative skills, based this program from Lighthouse Writers Workshop in Denver.</td>
<td><a href="https://springboardexchange.org/write-denver-toolkit/">https://springboardexchange.org/write-denver-toolkit/</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Your Idea Here</td>
<td>A toolkit of ideas and templates filling vacant storefronts with community projects from the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota.</td>
<td><a href="https://springboardexchange.org/yourideahere/">https://springboardexchange.org/yourideahere/</a></td>
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