

Legal Name

Lower Manhattan Cultural Council

Project Title

To host Jennifer Monson at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council to imagine and explore new approaches to demand-building for contemporary dance. Monson will bring her expertise in interdisciplinary collaboration to our Arts East River Waterfront program.

DDCF Grant Number

2013246

Project Progress and Successes

Since 2013, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council (LMCC) has been implementing Arts East River Waterfront, a series of collaborations in New York City's Lower East Side that encourage community members to create and enjoy art and design installations, performances, and participatory activities along the East River Waterfront. In partnership with area organizations, residents, and artists, this multi-faceted initiative seeks to engage the local community and activate waterfront sites like Pier 42, which we helped to transform into a temporary park with summertime arts programming as it awaits permanent development as a public park. As part of this initiative, LMCC collaborated with Jennifer Monson in an effort to imagine a model for how artists and local organizations could use cultural programming as an effective way to engage the community, activate spaces, highlight existing performance organizations in the area, and increase demand for movement-based practice.

Jennifer Monson is a choreographer, performer, and teacher and Artistic Director of dance research organization iLAND (interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art Nature and Dance). Since 2000, Jennifer's work has investigated the relationship between movement and environment, leading her into inquiries of cultural and scientific understandings of large-scale phenomena such as animal navigation and migration, geological formations, and re-functioned sites such as the abandoned Ridgewood Reservoir. Her research has provided her and her collaborators with the means to unearth and inquire into choreographic and embodied ways of knowing and re-imagining our relationship to the environments and spaces humans/all beings inhabit. LMCC believes that her choreographic practice, interdisciplinary and collaborative processes, and body of work demonstrate the value of embodied research to inform and shape our relationships to places we inhabit. Working with Jennifer, LMCC seeks to bring this approach to the community adjacent to the East River waterfront to build demand for dance and increase attachment amongst area residents for their waterfront.

Although Jennifer has participated in various LMCC programs since 1995 and at one time lived in the area, we began this collaboration with multiple introductory planning meetings in order to visit and explore the waterfront, meet various cultural and community-based partners as well as local stakeholders, and understand the context of the neighborhood more deeply. The Lower East Side, Chinatown, and Two Bridges neighborhoods are a dynamic area comprising significant immigrant and low/middle-income populations who

have been facing demographic changes as an effect of post 9/11 gentrification trends and have recently been engaged in multi-faceted urban planning discussions related to waterfront resilience investments coming from federal, state, and local sources. Furthermore, despite being a socially and culturally rich community, there is limited awareness of local cultural assets amongst the broader citywide audiences and an increasing feeling that those local assets are under threat of displacement. Cultural actors in the area are also being asked to do more to facilitate or participate in community-wide educational, ecological awareness, and neighborhood development efforts.

After initial meetings to deepen our shared understanding of the community, its history, culture, values, and needs, LMCC and Jennifer shifted our focus to building relationships and understanding of the needs and goals of prospective, future partners in the community. In July 2014, we invited 70+ local cultural and community organizations to participate in three Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Art, Nature, and Dance (iLAND) discovery workshops that centered on the exploration of creative practices in the Lower East Side, Chinatown, and Two Bridges neighborhoods. Invited guests included various practitioners in the area--ranging from arts to science to community organizing, and our goal was to learn about each other's practices, identify connections among these and movement-based practices, and initiate preliminary thinking about the waterfront in relation to the diverse practices (both arts and non-arts) and cultural traditions alive in the community. In order to help guide these conversations, the research opportunities focused on three themes:

1. **WANDERING:** Most cultures have some tradition of walking whether it is about migration, myth, or spiritual practice. Many walking traditions take us to water. In this two-day workshop, we were able to lead an exploration of participants' personal and cultural practices of walking to consider and discover ways that they might consider accessing the waterfront creatively for pleasure, spiritual renewal, and ecological awareness.

2. **WATER:** Our neighborhoods and communities have deep, specific, and diverse relationships to our waterfront. We were particularly interested in the cultural practices and histories that are shaped by being on, adjacent to, or near water. In this two-day workshop, we were able to hear more about participants' practices and ideas about water to think about ways to foster new perceptions and understandings of the neighborhood in relationship to the water for future implementation processes.

3. **ECOLOGY:** As ecological relationships are radically shifting in our city and neighborhoods, it has been increasingly important to recuperate and enliven our relationship to the waterfront through ecological awareness. In this workshop, we were able to draw in community members with scientific and artistic practices to identify potential interdisciplinary approaches to building a robust, creative, and enlivening relationship between our waterfront and our neighborhood.

Through these workshops, LMCC and Jennifer were able to participate in a dialogue with local stakeholders to gain a better understanding of the practices and cultural traditions alive in the area and begin to identify the best way to work with community members to realize a shared vision around the future cultural uses of new public spaces being created on the East River waterfront.

In September 2014, LMCC, Jennifer, and her collaborators at iLAND held a subsequent gathering of participants from the July activities and introduced our proposed thinking about further research and learning opportunities along the East River waterfront. Beyond the grant period, LMCC and Jennifer Monson are developing ideas for how interdisciplinary

groups can re-imagine and expand our individual and collective understanding of our practices. Inspired by iLAND's approach to exploring and developing new interdisciplinary methodologies via sharing process, language, and on-site experience, we believe this research will nurture future collaborations between Jennifer, additional artists, scientists, community organizers, activists, environmentalists, urban designers, architects, and others that integrate creative practice within different fields/disciplines and increase an awareness and understanding of movement-based practices.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

LMCC and Jennifer Monson recognized our success would be heavily reliant on our ability to connect with local residents and stakeholders and learn about the range of perspectives in the area. This is why we dedicated the first few months of the grant period to conducting personal outreach to LMCC's community-based partners in order to develop a greater understanding of working with local residents and stakeholders and gauge partners' interest in potential opportunities to collaborate with Jennifer and iLAND. This was a specialized and lengthy process and required many ongoing conversations with prospective partners, but through these conversations and broader community workshops, we identified a strategy for continued learning and how to identify the most effective ways to engage local residents' interests, participation, and voices in contemporary arts and cultural activities along the waterfront, which we hope to deploy in future programming. Furthermore, we made it a priority to ensure that the invitations to the July workshops were clear and easy to understand for all prospective attendees. Since we were hoping to engage a diverse group of participants, we believed it was important to present accessible opportunities both to meet with us and share their knowledge, needs, and values and also to explore the complex topic of environmental sustainability as it relates to art and the specific urban context in the Lower East Side, Chinatown, and Two Bridges neighborhoods.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

For the past five years, LMCC has been adapting our programming to both help strengthen the capacity of artists as well as champion their role in encouraging hands-on participation in neighborhood decision-making. We are so grateful to Jennifer Monson and her iLAND collaborators for facilitating such a thoughtful approach to developing an in-depth understanding of the Lower East Side, Chinatown, and Two Bridges neighborhoods and their relationship to the waterfront. Our conversations to date have reinforced our belief that this has great potential to be a successful and innovative way to build demand for movement based practices and foster civic engagement. As many communities seek opportunities to improve equity and connectedness among their residents, we believe both our research and subsequent implementation approaches may help local stakeholders in some communities overcome not only the fatigue they may feel after years of complex planning processes but also the shortfalls of traditional urban planning/development approaches, which may inadvertently omit or feel inaccessible to immigrant and low/middle-income communities.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

www.lmcc.net/program/arts-east-river-waterfront/
www.ilandart.org

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

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