

Uprooting Ageism: Shifting Our Thinking to Serve Older Adults

By Drew Malmuth

“In the conversation around equity, ageism is almost never discussed,” says **Teresa Bonner**, executive director of Aroha Philanthropies, a foundation that has invested nearly \$8 million in support of arts programming that serves adults over 55. “Which is unfortunate, because there is so much work that needs to be done.” For Bonner, and many others in our field, community arts educators are failing to live up to their charge — a charge to serve all community members, no matter the stage in life. Too often, conceptions of student populations fail to include older adults, a population that will nearly double in the next four decades, rising from 43.1 million in 2012 to 83.7 million in 2050, according to The Center for Health Design. At organizations where older adults are part of the community, it is still rare to find the type of intentional, sequential learning that is offered to young learners.

In many ways, our field is not set up to meet the diverse — and ever-expanding needs — of the student population over 55. The arts funding community has only recently begun to adopt the term creative aging (or artful aging), and support is far from widespread. Long-term community partnerships and collaboration between arts educators and K-12 schools place youth-serving programs at the center of organizational strategy. And, perhaps most importantly, ageist ideas about what older adults want to learn and how much they are able to learn continue to pervade our individual thinking. In recognition of this inequitable system, the National Guild has worked to provide resources — in particular the Catalyzing Creative Aging program — that helps arts education organizations build innovative programming for an aging population that is living longer, healthier lives. However, the web of interlocking factors that contributes to a lack of creative aging programs is not going to be untangled easily. It will require deep examination — from individuals, arts organizations, funders, and other stakeholders — and a concerted effort from arts educators around the country.

To help with that process, one might ask: how did we get here as a field and what are some possible steps forward? In the article below, we’ll look at the pervasiveness of ageism, systemic issues facing creative aging, and some institutional strategies for shifting thinking — and processes — in a way that advances equity for older learners.

Ageism: Part of the Fabric of Everyday Life

According to Ashton Applewhite, author of *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism*, “Many people don’t make the distinction between ‘ageism’ and ‘aging.’ They see ‘old’ and just put their heads back in the sand, pretending that something that’s happening to all of us every day — getting older — is somehow, magically, not happening to them. That denial feeds ageism, and segregates us, and fills us with needless dread. Way better to pull our heads out of the sand and start coming to terms with our own aging — which starts with the uncomfortable step of looking at our own bias.” Indeed, the nearly universal fear of aging — particularly in American culture — speaks to a particular under-



standing of what it means to get older. To age is to slow down, to check out, to ask less of society, and to become less attuned to life.

As Teresa Bonner noted in a 2016 article for *Philanthropy New York*, there are a number of ways that ageism shows up in our everyday thinking:

- Think about the language you hear everyday: geezer, old lady, dirty old man. Can you imagine intelligent, educated people using equivalent language about people of color or people with disabilities?
- How many times a day do we see ads for products that are “anti-aging” or “age-defying” — despite the fact that we know there’s no such thing?
- Consider the often-used term “silver tsunami.” A tsunami destroys everything in its path, and all you can do is run away. Is this what we really think about the bonus of 30+ years of longevity that we have today?
- Next time you fill out a survey, notice the age categories. Standard survey classifications are 15-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64 and 65+. Do people 65-105 have the same opinions? Or do we just not care what they are?

In many cases, however, ageism may not be expressed in overt language or practices. As noted by **Nathan Majoros**, program director at Lifetime Arts, well-meaning arts organizations can have ageism show up in the way that they conceive of what type of programming older adults are looking for. “Organizations may unconsciously assume that older adults want a particular type of programming — something passive and not overly skill-based. But older adults are an extremely diverse learning population and we’ve found they often prefer in-depth, sequential learning that challenges them to develop new skills.”

Given this context, how has ageism played a role in shaping the community arts education ecosystem? And how are trends starting to move in the other direction?

Looking Upstream: A System that Leaves Older Adults Behind

While ageism has been a part of the process, there is a complicated institutional history that has led us to the point where arts education is set up to serve youth. “Because learning is so inextricably linked with K-12 school and formal education, an infrastructure has been created within the arts education world that is primarily focused on young people,” says Teresa Bonner. “For many arts educators, serving youth is just a natural outgrowth of the way that the system is historically designed.”

Reinforcing that process, the arts funding community has, for most of its history, been unwilling to conceive of an arts education where young people are not the main beneficiaries. Reflecting on her experience interacting with arts funders over the last decade, Bonner notes that it’s only been recently that “funders have even conceived of creative aging as a possibility, or that they may be ageist in the way they are allocating resources.” In most cases, she notes, “funders are considering how their investments are going to address problems ‘upstream’. How are the resources going to intervene at the earliest possible stage? But that lens prohibits us from seeing the value in investing in older adults. Furthermore, with life spans increasing, a person at 65 may have a lot more ‘upstream’ than we think!”

To help combat this perception that older adults have less of an “upside,” Aroha, and other leaders — including Tim Carpenter of ENGAGE — have pushed the funding community to recognize the immense potential of older learners and the unique assets that they bring to their communities.

Shifting toward an asset-based approach to aging

In instances where the arts is envisioned in conjunction with aging, more often than not the vision involves treating dementia, Alzheimer’s, or a number of other ailments associated with aging. This is vitally important work, but, in many cases, it can reinforce the idea that older adults are only characterized by their deficits. “In recent years, philanthropy has moved to an asset-based, rather than deficit-based, approach to many social



issues,” Bonner says. “For example, funders today work to empower people with disabilities, not simply provide charity to them. Why aren’t we expanding this approach to older adults?”

In Bonner’s view, making the shift to understanding arts learning for older adults from an asset-based perspective is fundamental to advancing systemic change. “We tend to undervalue the assets that older adults have. People associate aging with ‘a lack of,’ even though most older adults are independent and cognitively fit well into their 80s and beyond.” This reinforces ageism while also vastly limiting the scope of what programs are deemed possible. Would our field, at this point, consider providing youth programs that are only focused on disability? In the same way, when people immediately associate arts and aging with dementia — which is often the norm — there is an inability to imagine a creative aging field that focuses on the remarkable assets of those 55 and better.

Moving funders toward support for arts and aging

Can Guild member organizations play a role in pushing funders to support creative aging? “Absolutely,” says Bonner, “The best thing for Guild members to do is to experiment with and grow quality creative aging programs. The more funders see the work in action, the more they will examine their own practices.” Beyond that, “getting the state arts agencies involved is going to be crucial. Their investment will send a signal that this is something that should be thought about and explored. I think state governments are starting to recognize the importance of this work for improving and saving lives. We are delighted that the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies invited us to present a briefing on this topic at NASAA’s November Assembly.”

As funding systems start to slowly shift to include arts learning for older adults, Guild organizations can begin the internal learning that is often necessary to make a commitment to creative aging in a holistic way.



Baum School of Art, Allentown, PA

An Intentional Commitment: Fleisher Art Memorial and Institutional Learning

Since receiving funding through the Guild's Catalyzing Creative Aging (CCA) program, **Fleisher Art Memorial** (Philadelphia, PA) has started a process of examining what it would look like to make a deep institutional commitment to serving older adults. For **Vita Litvak**, manager of adult programs at Fleisher, that doesn't just mean examining programs and curriculum. "What was important for me to understand is that if ageism is embedded in our individual thinking and in our institutions, it is going to show up in any number of organizational processes, from teaching artist interactions to front desk staff." After receiving training from Lifetime Arts through the CCA program, Litvak came back to Fleisher and thought about how the organization could go from having a robust older adult student population to having intentional, strategic creative aging programs that are part of the culture of the institution.

"We knew that older adults were a large part of our student body. Forty-one percent of our 2,200 adult students last year were 50 and better. And when we looked at our morning and afternoon classes, that percentage goes up to 66%. However, what became clear to us through CCA was that we were not doing everything we could to serve that population in an intentional way. In many ways, we did not consider that group as a specific demographic with very particular needs. I sat down with my colleagues and created an institution-wide initiative that would help forward creative aging as a strategic priority. We presented our recommendations for intentional creative aging to board and staff and came up with a number of action steps in terms of how we were going to effectively serve older adults — both ones that are currently here at Fleisher and ones that we hope to welcome into our community."

As part of this process of institutional growth, Litvak recognized that it was necessary to engage staff and teaching artists in training around ageism. This winter, Fleisher will engage Lifetime Arts for staff-wide training that will, ideally, mimic some of the CCA learning for the broader institution. "Discussions with Lifetime Arts and peer organizations around ageism were eye opening — it is unfortunately uncommon to consider how ageism plays a role in our lives — and we believe those perspectives need to be introduced staff-wide, especially with those such as our visitor services staff who interface with our older adult students most often," Litvak said. "Some members of our institution believe that because they interact with older adults they can't be ageist or they are still uncomfortable with the idea of having classes that are exclusive to older adults. So I'm hopeful that deeper education around creative aging and ageism will help us, as an institution, shift processes in a positive direction."

Programmatically, this institutional commitment has allowed Fleisher to expand its creative aging work into new areas of Philadelphia. The CCA process resulted in a free 12-week program in ceramics that extends access to the arts to the Latino immigrant community in South Philadelphia, which Fleisher has a long history of serving through its annual Dia de los Muertos celebration and bilingual classes. Partnering with Puentes de Salud, a community center serving the community, Fleisher developed a program called *Cerámica: Cuentos Para Las Generaciones*, or *Ceramics: Stories for the Ages*.

In terms of how others can begin this process of institutional change, Litvak does recommend considering outside facilitators that have in-depth experience with aging and the arts. However, one way to get started internally is to survey your older adult population and ask them what they might hope to see from more intentional programming. "Going directly to the source and asking questions about needs and aspirations is extremely important for starting a broader conversation and planning next steps," Litvak says.

Moving Toward an Equitable System

Ageing is a process that we all ultimately face; however, as a society, we are more often taught to fear aging than we are to understand it in all of its remarkable complexity. The arts are, in many ways, well-equipped to support an increasingly older population that seeks creativity, vibrancy, and opportunities for self-expression. However, systemic barriers have historically made it difficult for us to get there. Resources have been scarce, programs have equated learning with younger populations, and, ultimately, we have not undergone the internal learning necessary to grapple with ageism. With the rise of the creative aging movement, many of those trends may be shifting, and the Guild hopes in the not-too-distant future to see older adult learners as a core constituency for community arts educators around the country.

Resources

Artful Aging Resource Guide - Aroha Philanthropies, 2016 - <https://bit.ly/2xPyVXV>

Creative aging resources from Lifetime Arts - <https://bit.ly/2DMDKqx>

"Ed and Ashton Applewhite: A Conversation about Ageism" - Lifetime Arts, 2016 - <https://bit.ly/2NdYgjl>

This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto against Ageism - Ashton Applewhite, 2016 - <https://bit.ly/2xRECF4>

"Who me, ageist? How to start a consciousness raising group" - Ashton Applewhite, 2016 - <https://bit.ly/2P2iJta>

