

GRADIENTS OF TRUST

An Ethnographic Study of The Union for Contemporary Art
in Omaha, Nebraska



Photo by Harrison Martin, The Union for Contemporary Art

What is the issue?

Arts organizations rooted in communities of color often reside in historically segregated and neglected areas. This can complicate their efforts to build trust with community members and staff. This study examines how The Union's founder, a newcomer to the North Omaha community where the organization is located, navigated complex relationships with Omaha artists and the local, predominantly Black community.

What is the research context?

The Union is a community-based contemporary arts center founded in 2011 to strengthen the social and cultural landscape of its local community through the arts. The Union provides a deep level of support to Omaha's local artist community, who lacked access to studio and performance space, equipment, and professional development opportunities. The Union is located in North Omaha, a predominantly Black and historically redlined community in Nebraska's most populous city.

What are the research findings?

The study suggests that securing community members' trust is a particularly complex process for newcomer organizations serving communities of color. Despite having

Research Approach

Over a 10-month period beginning in 2022, researcher Jason C. White conducted participant observations and in-depth interviews with staff at The Union for Contemporary Art. To understand the leadership team's perspectives, White analyzed meeting minutes and structured journal entries written by two executive staff members. In addition to interviews with staff, White interviewed 50 local residents and attended various community-led events.

good intentions, these organizations may face heightened scrutiny from community members whose experiences of marginalization and neighborhood underinvestment is often associated with outsider-led institutions.

The Union's founder, Brigitte McQueen, a Detroit native, worked for another Omaha arts organization before deciding to launch her own. To prepare, she engaged local artists to learn about their needs and identified a lack of access to: (1) locally-based continuing education opportunities; (2) studio and performance space

Brief based on *Ten Months at The Union for Contemporary Art* by Jason C. White, Ph.D.

and equipment; and (3) professional development opportunities. She enlisted local artists and donors to co-develop an organization to meet those needs. Her careful listening and planning with the creative community throughout the city helped secure the trust and endorsement of the local creative community; however, securing the same trust and endorsement among the community “insiders” in North Omaha proved to be more difficult.

The study suggests that North Omaha residents varied in their levels of trust in and endorsement of The Union. Some residents publicly endorsed the organization and viewed it as a welcomed addition to North Omaha and a vital asset to the local Black creative landscape. Other residents indicated a “trust-but-verify” stance, whereby they perceived the organization as a welcome addition to the neighborhood but believed that The Union had not yet done enough in the community to warrant their complete trust.

Still, other residents did not trust that the organization’s mission would benefit them. They tended to see The Union as an outsider-led organization and were reluctant to endorse or participate in its programs. Among residents who expressed high levels of trust and endorsement were local Black artists, suggesting that The Union is addressing specific needs in the arts community that

are less obvious or compelling to community leaders interested in uplifting the well-being of the North Omaha community as a whole.

Suggested Brief Citation

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Read More

This article by Jason C. White offers a more comprehensive report of his ethnographic observations at The Union and in the surrounding community of North Omaha: <https://www.artsmangementjournal.com/s/Ten-Months-at-The-Union-for-Contemporary-Art.pdf>

Why does this matter?

Leaders of arts organizations rooted in communities of color should not assume that community trust is forthcoming without careful attention to local stakeholders, community leaders, and gatekeepers. Buy-in from one community group does not automatically lead to buy-in from others. Funders and other supporters could consider:

- Providing support for organizational leaders to spend time in their community developing relationships and trust.
- Helping to ensure that community leaders are represented in the organization’s governance and advisory capacities, in order to build better relationships and understanding.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The original research and findings summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.