

Funder Spotlight: How 3Arts Supports Undercapitalized Artists in the Chicago Area

Mike Scutari, 11/16/21



MUSICIAN CAITLIN EDWARDS, A RECIPIENT OF A 2021 3ARTS AWARD. PHOTO CREDIT: OREL CHOLETTE

IP Funder Spotlights offer quick rundowns of the grantmakers that are on our radar, including a few key details on how they operate and what they're up to right now. Today, we take a look at a Chicago-based nonprofit arts service and grantmaking organization that supports women artists, artists of color, and deaf and disabled artists.

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What this funder cares about

3Arts has distributed a total of \$5.8 million to more than 1,600 artists in the six-county Chicago metropolitan area since 2007, supporting 69% women artists, 71% artists of color, and 17% deaf and disabled artists. Its career-spanning support takes the form of cash awards, artist-to-artist grants, residency fellowships, professional development, and 3Arts Projects, a crowdfunding platform with a built-in match that helps artists finance new work. Since 2012, the platform has supported more than 157 projects and distributed more than \$800,000.

Why you should care

I suspect artists outside of Chicago may not find an obvious reason to care about 3Arts, but I would argue that this funder deserves your attention either way. First, 3Arts has been providing critical unrestricted support long before the pandemic forced musicians, dancers, artists and actors to decide whether to spend money on [food or rent](#). The more funders like 3Arts can highlight and celebrate the power of such support, the more likely other grantmakers may come around to their way of thinking.

Just as importantly, 3Arts has emerged as a forceful advocate for disabled artists. Six years ago, the organization partnered with the University of Illinois at Chicago's "Bodies of Work," a network that showcases the disability experience, to establish the 3Arts Residency Fellowship with the goal of building audiences for disability art and strengthening the professional pipeline.

Earlier this year, 3Arts announced the next phase of its work, the [Disability Culture Leadership Initiative](#), to document the experiences of fellowship alumni, advocate for the artistic and economic mobility of deaf and disabled artists, and "highlight the potential for disability aesthetics to expand and enrich every artistic discipline."

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Funders' support for disabled artists has historically been underwhelming (to put mildly), but the tide [appears to be turning](#). Funders can look to 3Arts and its extensive work in the field for guidance and inspiration.

Where the money comes from

3Arts was founded as the Three Arts Club of Chicago in 1912 with the mission of providing a temporary home and a club for young women studying the arts. In 2006, its leaders concluded they [lacked the resources](#) to restore and renovate the building. The next year, the board of directors sold the property and invested the net proceeds in an operating fund to support its new mission of backing the city's women-identified artists, artists of color, and deaf and disabled artists. (The organization had been going by "3Arts" for years, but made the name change official when leaders amended its articles of incorporation in 2008.)

3Arts funds its programs with a mix of dollars from its operating fund and contributed income from grantmakers like the Joyce, Reva & David Logan Foundation, and [MacArthur foundations](#).

Where the money goes

3Arts' money goes to women artists, artists of color, and deaf and disabled artists in and around Chicago. It provides three unrestricted cash awards. The first, 3Arts Awards, provide \$30,000 in support to 10 artists in dance, music, teaching arts, theater and visual arts. Its Next Level/Spare Room Awards provide grants of \$50,000 to three women visual artists who are past 3Arts awardees practicing in the Chicago area. 3Arts also administers [Make a Wave](#), an artist-to-artist giving program that invites each of the previous year's 3Arts Award recipients to select an artist to receive a surprise check.

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3Arts has branched out to channel support to the broader Chicago arts ecosystem across the past two years. For example, it instituted a new tradition of splitting the proceeds from its [annual awards celebration](#) with organizations that hire artists. In 2021, 3Arts gave \$15,000 to Free Street Theater, an organization that works with theater and teaching artists. This year also found 3Arts earmarking \$10,000 to provide \$100 stipends to artists who apply for the 3Arts Awards in recognition of their efforts.

Open door or barbed wire?

Given 3Art's geographic purview, its support is off-limits to artists outside of the Chicago area. That's admittedly a lot of barbed wire, but par the course for most place-based arts funders.

Chicago artists seeking unrestricted support through the 3Arts Awards will have to put their trust in a group of at least 35 anonymous local artists, curators and advocates who nominate candidates. After the nominees complete an online application process, five national, discipline-specific panels of judges convene to select 10 awardees from the pool. Check out the 2021 judges [here](#).

Latest big moves

It's been an eventful year for 3Arts. With support from the Joyce Foundation and two anonymous donors at the Chicago Community Foundation, the organization distributed a record 134 awards and 154 3Arts Emergency Response grants and invested more than \$1 million in artists across all programs.

Support from Joyce and other funders enabled 3Arts to bankroll a one-time expansion of its artist-to-artist Make a Wave grants from \$2,000 to \$4,000. 3Arts awarded a total of 121 of these surprise grants in 2021. And on November 2, 3Arts announced the [three recipients](#) of its 3Arts Next

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Level/Spare Room Awards—Tirtza Even, Aram Han Sifuentes, and Candace Hunter.

Looking ahead, 3Arts will upgrade the [Disability Culture Leadership Initiative](#) section of its website with a more distinct landing page and video conversations with artists. 3Arts envisions the page as a resource hub for other arts organizations, further underscoring its role as an important thought leader in the field.

One cool thing to know

The highly competitive art world can be a cold and unforgiving place for those who've been turned away by galleries, dealers, and yes, even grantmakers. Rejection can take the form of a phone call that's never returned or a terse email devoid of anything resembling constructive criticism. 3Arts takes a different and far more helpful approach. Its leaders provide private feedback sessions to any artist who applies for a 3Arts Award, but is not selected by its national jury panels. 3Arts has conducted 40 of these sessions thus far in 2021.

<https://www.insidephilanthropy.com/home/2021/11/16/funder-spotlight-how-3arts-supports-undercapitalized-artists-in-the-chicago-area>