



Artists at Work, an Ambitious National Initiative Inspired by the WPA Launches in Western Massachusetts

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Scenic painter Anaïs Thomas at work

Organized by THE OFFICE Performing Arts+ Film and the FreshGrass Foundation, AAW Kicks Off with Cultural Hub Institutions Including Hancock Shaker Village, Images Cinema, Institute for the Musical Arts, Jacob's Pillow, MASS MoCA, and The Mount, Supporting Artists Spanning Disciplines in Work with a Wide Range of Local Social Impact Initiative

[THE OFFICE Performing Arts+ Film](#), in an effort to provide artists across the U.S. a living wage and foster healthy communities in the wake of the financially catastrophic COVID-19 pandemic, today launches **Artists at Work (AAW)**, a new program inspired by FDR's Depression-era Works Progress Administration and its Federal Project Number One, which at its peak employed more than 40,000 writers, musicians, artists, and actors nationwide. Designed to be scaled to regions in every state in the U.S., AAW will begin with a pilot in Western Massachusetts including six cultural institutions—**Hancock Shaker Village** (Craft and Design), **Images Cinema** (Film), **Institute for the Musical Arts** (Music), **Jacob's Pillow** (Dance), **MASS MoCA** (Visual Art and Performance), and **The Mount, Edith**

Wharton's Home (Literature)—six artists, and six local social impact initiatives that address issues such as substance abuse and poverty, mental health, and food justice.

As America endures and eventually emerges from this unprecedented public health and economic crisis, AAW aims to help a significant number of artists to continue to make work, to activate cultural institutions in support of that work, to put that work into the public sphere for free to audiences (and, in doing so, to boost local economies), and to use the artists and their work in the service of building healthy communities.

“Artists are the messengers who will lead us into the future—their work will help us to understand our new world; their creativity and inspirations will both express and allow us to maintain our humanity through trials that feel inconceivable. But right now, our musicians, fine artists, craftmakers, designers, filmmakers, storytellers, theater makers, writers, and dancers are suffering grave financial circumstances; their incomes are being decimated, and many can’t pay rent, let alone make art,” says **Rachel Chanoff, Director of THE OFFICE**. “Artists at Work directly impacts artists: supporting them with financial and other resources so they can continue to work, and in doing so honoring the dignity of that work and facilitating the positive role art plays in society, both economically and as spiritual, emotional, and intellectual sustenance. But AAW’s outcomes will also reach beyond artists to institutions and to culture workers of all stripes, and beyond the culture sector itself into communities through civic engagement and community health initiatives, with wide-ranging impacts.”

AAW will both help individuals and boost the overall cultural sector, which employs millions of Americans and contributes to the economic and social resilience of every community in the country. A 2017 [report](#) by the American Alliance of Museums found that museums alone contribute more than \$50 billion to the GDP, generate \$12 billion in tax revenue, and produce over 725,000 jobs—twice that of the professional sports industry. Art is a powerful engine for economic development: when it flourishes, diverse categories of workers and business benefit, from theaters and concert halls and cinemas and the ticket takers, sound engineers, janitors, bartenders, and electricians they employ, to the restaurants and other local businesses that are positively impacted by cultural events.

AAW is anchored in a series of direct living-wage salaries for artists working across all artistic disciplines, who will be put on payroll with health care benefits for a six-month period that could renew for an additional six months. This gives participating artists the opportunity to extend healthcare coverage via COBRA and file for unemployment at the end of the period, should they choose to. Artists will in turn create a new work to be presented in a free public program; participate in a community outreach initiative suitable to their work; and participate in online open dialogues and conversations with other artists and advisors across Culture Hubs. Along with the **FreshGrass Foundation**, The OFFICE’s national partners on AAW include the **Sundance Institute**, the **International Storytelling Center**, and **Theater of War Productions**.

The Cultural Hubs, Artists, and Local Social Impact Initiatives in the Western MA Pilot

[Hancock Shaker Village](#) is a landmark destination of 750 acres, 20 historic Shaker buildings, and over 22,000 Shaker artifacts, and is the oldest working farm in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts. The institution will work with local artist **Brece Honeycutt**, who will engage the farm, garden, and forest landscape of Hancock Shaker Village as materials for her multifaceted creative practice, which includes work in fiber, natural dyeing, printmaking, sculpture, and bookbinding. In addition to having an open studio on the Hancock campus, her project will culminate in a series of public workshops and an exhibition in partnership with **Camphill Village**, a community for adults with developmental disabilities and service volunteers, located in Copake, New York.

[Images Cinema](#), a beloved, nonprofit single-screen movie theater, has selected North Adams, MA-based documentarian **Joe Aidonidis**, who aims to give an honest view of the opiate crisis in the Northern Berkshires. Aidonidis, who will focus his work on families of those struggling with addiction, believes that addiction is a disease of isolation that has been worsened by the pandemic. Aidonidis will collaborate with community-based organizations including **GAAMHA (Gardner Athol Area Mental Health Association)**, which provides services to men with substance use disorders and guides individuals into recovery in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

[Institute for the Musical Arts](#), an organization in Goshen, MA, that supports women and girls in music and music-related businesses, has selected **Naia Kete**, one of their students from their first summer program in 2002. She will be creating a six-song EP of new music in collaboration with youth educators from **The Alianza Project**, a community trauma healing and youth leadership organization in Holyoke, MA. The EP will include a booklet that shares photos and stories of these youth. In addition to the EP, Naia will create a series of mini-documentaries—one per month of the pilot—to share the process of research, interviews, writing and recording the songs at IMA.

[Jacob's Pillow](#), home to America's longest-running international dance festival and currently in the midst of its transition to becoming a year-round center for dance, will work with choreographer **Dante Brown** in partnership with **Roots Rising**, a local nonprofit organization whose mission is to empower youth and build community through food and farming, strengthening the local food system through the transformational power of meaningful work. In conjunction with the ongoing protests, Brown will explore ways to integrate ideas of food sustainability to a broader concept of “sustainability” of mind, body, and spirit for marginalized communities as he collaborates with Roots Rising’s virtual farmers market.

[MASS MoCA](#), one of the world’s liveliest (and largest) centers for making, showing, and enjoying today’s most important art, music, dance, theater, film, and video, has partnered with **Northern Berkshire Community Coalition (nbCC)**, which empowers, connects, convenes and supports communities in the Northern Berkshire region. With **UNO Community Center and Park**, nbCC has created a place where neighbors can build positive relationships with one another, teach others their talents, learn new skills, and work together to ensure that the community represented by UNO is a vibrant, caring, and safe place to live. Through a submission-based process, MASS MoCA has selected visual artist **Sarah DeFusco**, whose practice combines sewing, screen printing, and painting. She is the co-founder of WallaSauce, a North Adams clothing-based brand that makes handmade products from up-cycled and alternative materials sourced mainly from secondhand sellers, giving new life to old things and turning what could be considered trash into fashionable, functional, and unique products.

[The Mount](#), the literary hub of the Berkshires, will be working with **Lia Russell-Self**, a local poet and theater artist. They are partnering with local organization **The Rusty Anvil** to lead creative writing workshops for young people (15-30) with a particular focus on queer youth of color in the Berkshires and facilitate the creation of a living archive that gives voice and digital space to marginalized voices in the community. Writing from these workshops will be shared in a public performance at the conclusion of the pilot project in a to-be-determined format, as the reality of the pandemic allows. Russell-Self will also lead workshops promoting mental health and wellbeing, focusing on reconnecting to nature, activation of the body, and awakening of the creative spirit.

About THE OFFICE performing arts + film

THE OFFICE performing arts + film develops, produces, and presents art that makes a difference. We are an independent performing arts and film curator and production company based in New York and London that works in ongoing partnerships with festivals, venues, and institutions to create cultural programming that is unique and mission specific. We produce events around the world and consult on programming with organizations ranging from museums to universities to libraries to performing arts centers to philanthropies. We work in both the non-profit and commercial arts worlds, and we have a special focus on making art happen that has a positive impact on society.

About FreshGrass Foundation

The [FreshGrass Foundation](#) is a 501(c)(3) that works to preserve, support, and create innovative grassroots music, to help push roots music forward while also embracing and celebrating its past, and to incorporate these pursuits with sustainability initiatives that connect roots music artists and entities to communities outside the music realm that share common goals.