



Cultural Organizing

Working for justice at the intersection of art, activism, education, and culture



Art is a Basic Human Need: An Interview with Felicia Young

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Featured image of the Hudson River Pageant, Photo by William Bourassa Jr.

On the day that [45](#) was inaugurated into office, I had a very hopeful conversation. I spoke on the phone with long-time cultural organizer Felicia Young, founder of the nonprofit [Earth Celebrations](#), who was getting ready to hit Washington DC for the big protest. She graciously took some time out to talk to me, sharing a bit about her personal journey from the mainstream arts world to running massive pageants as a way to organize communities in New York City and India.

Part 1: Early Explorations & an Epiphany

It would be helpful if you could start by talking a bit about how you got into this work — what has your journey been like?

I grew up in New York City, and by the time I was a senior in high school I already knew I wanted to go into the arts. That year I interned at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I was 16, training 11-year-olds to give tours in the African Wing of the Met. That's when I started thinking about these objects, and contrasting them with other art in the museum. They weren't just meant to hang on the wall. They were meant to be seen in the context of ceremonies and functional rituals.

I went to college in the height of the '80s. I majored in art history and ended up interning at [Christie's](#) after my freshman year. That was a whole experience of, "Oh my, if this is what art is about, you could be selling cars. This has nothing to do with what I'm interested in." That was a very important negative experience for me, because by the time I was 18 I'd already figured out that the commercial art world was not for me. I spent my junior year abroad in Italy and France and I did all this research on [Jacques-Louis David](#). I came across the fact that not only was he a painter; he was staging these large-scale political pageants for the revolution with 200,000 people staged throughout Paris. I became really intrigued by the idea of art in the streets. Then I came back to NY, and during senior year I had my epiphany in an African art history class. I'll never forget that moment, sitting at my desk watching a slide show of this art called [Mbari](#) that they do in Igboland, Nigeria. In response to, say, infant mortality or drought, the whole community will decide to hold a communal art making process. And when they say they're going to do Mbari it's a commitment. It could be 10 years or more. So, part of the community goes into seclusion, and the rest of the community will provide food for them so they don't have to work in the fields. They do the art with the shaman in a private, secluded area, and what they create is an elaborate mud hut with mud sculptures representing daily life and the gods. Then they open it up to the community and have a huge celebration, and people come from surrounding areas and admire it. Then, afterwards, they walk away and leave it to decay. It is organic and ephemeral. That really blew me away. It is not focused only on the object. It is all about the process, it is community engagement, and it's aiming to achieve a particular result. I didn't know if I really believed in the magic of it — that this process would make drought go away — but I saw the solidarity that gets built, and how that can strengthen the bonds within communities so that they are better able to deal with whatever problems they have. It's a method of social organizing and social bonding.

Part 2: Organizing Pageants in New York City

I got my first job at the [Alternative Museum](#) in 1987, when it was the only sociopolitical art museum in New York. They were doing incredible political art shows about homelessness, AIDS, the Middle East — but then who was coming to the shows? Other artists and their friends. It was still that insular art community. I used to run across the street to AT&T when the workers got out and say, "Hey, there's a great show over here maybe you should come." Sometimes I would get them to come, and they would say, "Oh, that was interesting," but because it was in a gallery space I recognized that no matter what we were talking about we were talking amongst ourselves.

Once, they were doing a Day of the Dead show for homelessness and AIDS, and I proposed a Día de los Muertos procession. I connected to the women's shelter and a treatment program, and I worked with them over months making visuals and poetry for a pageant that went from the museum down to city hall. After that I said to myself, "Oh, great, I've done my first pageant. I guess I can do this."

I don't know if you know Phyllis Yampolsky. She was one of the "happenings" artists from the '60s. She's a cultural organizer, one of the political artists from the [Judson Church](#) in New York City. She was looking for an assistant because she had been trying to save [McCaren pool](#) out in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It had been shut down, and that had racial implications because some white people were aiming to keep the North Brooklyn Black community from swimming in the pool. I ended up getting a job part time working with her,

which was an incredible training ground. My job was to go out through the entire North Brooklyn among the Russians, the Italians, the Polish, the Latino community on the south side, and the Black community. We did a series of festivals and a pageant that brought all these communities together creating visual art pieces. It included a 10 block long “Blue Ribbon for Racial Harmony,” which was carried by 100 participants moving from the south side of Williamsburgh through the various neighborhoods and into McCarren Park, creating the outline of the periphery of the pool.

I saw that by doing these pageants and festivals — and by getting the schools, community centers, YMCAs, churches, senior and neighborhood associations involved — people with all these different languages and different cultures who normally did not communicate, could come together. And it was breaking down a lot of the prejudices that people had. Eventually that pool was saved, and 25 years later it’s open.

This art, this ceremony, was as important as food. For these people, art was not luxury. It was essential and integrated into the core of their existence. A basic human need.

Much of my inspiration for the theatrical pageant art form comes from India. I had travelled to India in 1989. My mother is from Calcutta and I wanted to go to discover my roots and also explore the festivals and mythic drama pageants that are integral parts of their culture. I travelled there for four months to visit family and document festivals, including [Kumbha Mela](#), which is the largest gathering on the planet, and the [Chithirai festival](#), the wedding of Meenakshi. This elaborate drama takes place over the course of three weeks across an entire city and neighboring villages, with processions, ritual ceremonies, and a drama enacted through symbolic actions in various locations: streets, temples and along the riverbank.

It impressed me, again on so many levels. Everything that I’d been questioning was getting reaffirmed. It was a time of drought, and the government was coming in with water trucks and people were lining up, but instead of using this precious water for drinking and cooking they were using it to spray on statues as part of the festival. That’s when I started to think that this art, this ceremony, was as important as food. For these people, art was not luxury. It was essential and integrated into the core of their existence. A basic human need. I had seen these women in the desert going miles and miles and miles just to get pigment to create elaborate “rangoli” painting on their homes, when their precious time could be spent on collecting water or growing millet in the dessert sand.

Part 3: Garden Protectors

Then I came back to New York, and I ended up living right where I’m living right now, right down the street from what was the [Garden of Eden that Adam Purple had created](#) and that was destroyed in 1986 by the city. In 1991 there were nearly 60 gardens on the Lower East Side. These gardens had been created by local residents clearing out rubble strewn vacant lots that had been neglected by the city since the 60s and 70s. Residents had cultivated over 500 city-owned lots throughout the city, planting trees, flowers and vegetable gardens. They had become outdoor community and cultural centers, environmental science classrooms and theaters for festivals and community programming, cultivating a positive and life affirming culture along with vital open green space.

I realized that the fate of the Garden of Eden could potentially happen to all these magnificent gardens. I reached out to my neighborhood: local gardeners, artists, youth, schools, churches, and community centers. These were the days before the Internet and cell phones, when you had to show up physically to connect with people, at garden meetings, church gatherings, community events. You couldn’t even find out about a meeting unless you walked up every block and looked at every fence for a flyer. So I showed up and told people, “I have this idea, we could do a procession.” It would be ten hours long it would go to 45-50 gardens.

We'd do ceremonies and performances at each, telling the history of that garden and its struggles, and proposing their preservation.

So we collaborated for many months on a public art project and pageant. We created visual art, paper mache puppets, costumes, performances, dance, music, poetry and ceremonies. All the community centers got involved, teachers were creating visuals and costumes in their classrooms, and gardens hosted arts workshops. Artists were coming forward and volunteering — long-time Latino and African American community members, international artists who at that time were still hanging on in the east village. 1500 people participated in the first year.

After that first year, people immediately started planning for the next year. By the next year, [Theater for the New City](#) offered us free space. I incorporated as a nonprofit, and secured a permanent space at the 6th Street Community Center in 1994. By the time we got to 1995 and the threat to the gardens by development plans had increased. And because of the procession, I had contacts at every garden and could pick up the phone and notify them, “Your garden’s coming up at a community board meeting. You’d better get there!” *I think the fusion of those methods was really powerful, and had we not had the artistic component the organizing may have fizzled out.*

In '94 I called a public meeting at the St. Brigid's Church to explore different garden preservation options. Out of that, we formed the Lower East Side Garden Preservation Coalition to work toward solutions. We started meeting monthly, and we formed committees. It was really grassroots. So I had this year-long annual creative project that involved all these sectors creating the visual art pieces for the procession. Then you had some of the more traditional organizing methods: letter writing, going to community board meetings, showing up at these land-use and city planning hearings in city hall. I think the fusion of those methods was really powerful, and had we not had the artistic component the organizing may have fizzled out. The pageant brought people in who didn't consider themselves activists. It was fun and positive. It functioned sort of like Mbari, reinforcing that solidarity with the people and strengthening the resolve of the community. The pageant itself was an organizing tool, and it got a lot of press.



Save Our Gardens Procession: Flower bulb and marking of the garden on map ceremony, performed at 47 gardens. Photo credit, Christopher Butt.

And the pageant told the story of what was happening with the gardens, which was critical for reaching out beyond our neighborhood. I wove in a mythic drama that told the story of Gaia, who represented the gardens, getting kidnapped by developers. A giant butterfly would fly off the top of a six-story building into the gardens bringing a message of hope that the community could save the gardens. In another scene a battle would ensue where Gaia would be rescued by children in butterfly costumes, and at the end of the day 50 live butterflies would be released by the butterfly children celebrating the saving of the gardens. I believe that the Save Our Gardens pageant helped participants connect to the importance of the gardens on a visceral and emotional level. It built empathy and deep connection to the gardens as the heart and soul of the neighborhood.

Our grassroots coalition became citywide when, in 1996, Giuliani aimed to sell off and develop over 800 gardens throughout NYC. We reached out to gardeners in Harlem, Upper West Side, Bronx, and Brooklyn and said, “We’ve been organizing, we’ve formed a coalition, we should meet.” I had over 200 people show up at our offices on 6th street, and we formed the New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens, which is now called the [New York City Community Garden Coalition](#). I managed that coalition for the next few years. More elected officials came on board, along with Bette Midler and her New York Restoration Project which, along with Trust for Public Land and other philanthropists gave, 4.2 million dollars. Our efforts finally led to preservation of hundreds of community gardens throughout New York City. In 2002, newly-elected Mayor Bloomberg transferred nearly 200 to the Parks Department where they remain temporarily protected.

I did the pageant for another 3 years, until 2005. That was 15 years of a community organizing art project that built a local garden preservation effort and then city-wide coalition that was affecting policy. Today the gardens are being seen in a new role, as part of a plan for ecological sustainability. After Hurricane Sandy the Lower East Side was devastated by flooding. The gardens we preserved can help reduce impacts of flooding, storm surges, pollution-run off – things occurring with increasing frequency due to climate change. A 2 million federal grant was awarded for the Gardens Rising project to design and implement green infrastructure within the 47 gardens.

It’s a plan for climate resiliency and urban sustainability based in 50 years of work by local residents cultivating and preserving these gardens — an act of urban improvisation. And it can be replicated and cultivated in many urban neighborhoods.

Part 4: River Restoration

Finally, in 2005, I said, “Okay, I put in 15 years of my life, the gardens are safe.” I felt like the pageant had lost its edge. I had my daughter in 2004, so I kind of pulled back a little bit. And when she was young I kept taking her to the Hudson River Park. I grew up in New York City, and the Hudson River was brown, polluted, and largely inaccessible. But after 9/11 it was renovated. So I looked out at the river and I just had this vision or a dance of boats, and I said, “That’s it! I would love to bring attention to what’s going on here on the river. It’s coming back to life.”

So I started talking to the different river groups, including the Hudson River Park Trust and the River Project, and I was discovering that they were doing oyster planting programs to organically cleanse the river, that seahorses were breeding right off of Christopher Street, and I was thinking, “Wow, this is incredible.” I proposed a pageant down the whole Lower Manhattan section. I ended up amassing 50 community partners.

I did not want to just create an entertaining celebration, but rather a meaningful and functional ceremonial action. The procession had 13 stops along the riverfront where we held ceremonies to honor “stewards of the river” — representatives from the river organizations who wore stewards of the river robes made by children in workshops. The culminating performance ceremony featured a dance of boats. I enlisted various educational boating groups, paddle board and kayak clubs along with volunteers from the Harbor School and Stuyvesant High School to participate. The collaborative process built a sense of community and linked groups together around a common effort. The river was already in a restoration mode, not the crisis mode that the gardens were in, so it was a different point of impact. It was about building community engagement in the revitalization of the river and the waterfront, which was now coming back to life.

Then in 2013, I spontaneously went back to India, to Madurai, the city that originally inspired me. I reconnected with the people I had interviewed 25 years earlier. And I discovered how polluted their river had become. When I had been there in ‘89 you didn’t have all this plastic packaging, you hardly had any cars. Now there were cars everywhere, you could barely breathe, it was overpopulated, there was no recycling program and sketchy garbage pickup, and because of climate change it was drought-stricken.

I thought maybe they could apply their own art form here for the cleaning up of this river, just like I had used the art form to protect the gardens. So with my friend Sekar we approached a large NGO in the city, the Dhan Foundation with the idea. The NGO got it immediately, and said, “Lets’ do it,” but indicated that I needed to come up with half the budget. So I ran all over New York looking for the most important people connected to India, and eventually met up with [Dr. Geeta Mehta](#), president of [Asia Initiatives](#). She put in \$20,000 dollars and became a full partner and sponsor.

I flew back and forth five times in the course of a year and a half to build the pageant. The Dhan Foundation had deep roots within the city and rural villages, so I was able to connect with all the stakeholders. We engaged community associations, schools, educational and cultural institutions, women’s empowerment groups, municipal offices and government officials. I adapted process I had developed into 2-3 week engagement and workshop periods.

It was incredible to see the enthusiasm. The pageant form was immediately embraced. I reached out to local folk artisans to create work connected to the riverfront. These artisans practiced bamboo sculpture, paper mache, costume, “kolam” rice flour painting, clay sculpture, fabric dying, as well as music, song, dance, poetry and performance. It was slightly different that working with artists in our own culture. These artisans were skilled craftspeople, continuing family cultural traditions and using traditional iconography. I was asking them to expand the imagery and concepts, in order to express current issues around pollution and solutions for the river’s restoration. To facilitate the process, I built collaborations with some of the university art and architecture departments, and had the folk artisans work collaboratively.



Vaigai Fish at the Vaigai River Restoration Project, photo by Mark Antrobus

It resulted in a pageant of 5,000 people that went along the river front in Madurai. India can seem so chaotic; I can't even believe how that whole thing came together. And then, out of the pageant, the city appointed an official panel for the restoration of the river, and then they decided through the local NGO to keep the idea of the pageant going as monthly full moon ceremonies on the river. Dr. Geeta Mehta also engaged the Department of Urban Studies and Architecture at Columbia University in an exchange program around the project. Students and professors came as a group several times to Madurai to work collaboratively on waterfront and river restoration design projects. Then Columbia invited the professors and representatives from Madurai to New York City. It was really incredible to see how this effort grew, eventually launching a city initiative, panel, and river restoration trust.

It's amazing how this work that you've done has been so sustainable, beyond your direct involvement. That's it. You are the catalyst. It was one of those things where I was an outsider, but I wasn't. I had roots there, I had family members buried in the city and a deep connection going back hundreds of years. And I think they also found the story of the Hudson River restoration very inspiring. But also, it was because the NGO had a 30 year history of relationships in that community. That is why I was able to do the project in such a short time. And then they were able to continue the effort. This was around the same time that Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister, won his campaign saying that the most important issue for India was the restoration of our rivers. It was good timing, and the Vaigai River Restoration Project got a seat at the table in Delhi with the Ganges Project.

This has been a great story, and I know that there are many other projects you could talk about. Before you go, I wanted to ask you, on this inauguration day, what you are thinking for yourself and for other cultural organizers going forward.

I'm angry, everybody's angry. But you have to somehow transform that anger in a different way. Art can do that, it brings you to a new place because you're actually doing something that's creative.

Well, I I'm heading down in a few hours to Washington, and what I've seen in the past few days is the joining of forces of advocacy groups, activist groups, church groups, artists, all coming together in joyous affirmation. With all the horrors of what we're facing it's amazing how people are pitching in and coming together. And also, we've just witnessed the Standing Rock movement – the idea that we are not protestors we are water protectors, and the whole idea of going back to ceremony as a way of reconnecting people to the Earth. Because once you create those connections, you move forward in a different way. It's not out of that sense of just being angry and protesting. I mean, I'm angry, everybody's angry. But you have to somehow transform that anger in a different way. Art can do that, it brings you to a new place because you're actually doing something that's creative.

What Trump is doing is just like what Giuliani did when he went after all the gardens. He didn't just go after one neighborhood, he went after all of them, and it forced us to create a city-wide coalition, and by joining forces we actually achieved what we were trying to do, right? Well, I think that's what's happening now in a big way. Because everything – democracy, civil rights, our health, the environment –everything we should be caring about is under attack right now. That goes beyond party lines. So you've got to hope that since it's an attack on so many fronts and so many issues, that people will come together. And I think we're seeing that. It's a matter of our health, life, and future.

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