

Compton Foundation

Art as a Strategy for Change

By Ann McQueen



One Million Bones. Abiquiu Elementary, El Puente Charter School, Rising Moon Gallery, and the Abiquiu community created 250 bones. Naomi Natale. Photo: Steven Williams

This Funder Portrait is part of a series of brief papers and podcast interviews featuring funders who are supporting arts and culture as a creative strategy to achieve community building and development goals, civic engagement, or social justice goals. Visit the [Animating Democracy](#) website for other Funder Portraits and [Resources](#).

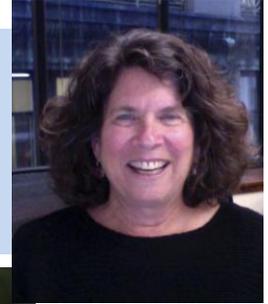
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The Compton Foundation supports the arts, including individual artists and filmmakers, with the explicit intention of amplifying critical issues in a way that blends the personal, political, emotional, and intellectual. It makes these grants based on a recently updated mission statement that recognizes “courageous storytelling” as a powerful strategy for “inspiring action toward a peaceful, just, sustainable future.” The family foundation, launched in 1949 and long focused on issues of peace, the environment, and women’s reproductive rights and justice, awards up to \$3.5 million a year from its \$60 million endowment. In the arts, this includes grants ranging from \$35,000 to \$50,000 to advocacy organizations that integrate the arts into their work and to artists making art that illustrates, activates, and advances the foundation’s key concerns. The foundation also makes equity investments in films that envision and promote change.

There are amazing opportunities, no matter what issue area you're working in, to fund cultural strategies. It just requires stepping back a little bit and opening your lens, your aperture, around your issue concern.

Ellen Friedman, Compton Foundation



Ellen Friedman (top), executive director, Compton Foundation
Jennifer Sokolove, program director, Compton Foundation

The [Compton Foundation](#) was founded in 1946 to promote peace by eliminating the conditions that lead to war. This bold and farsighted vision emerged from personal tragedy when Dorothy and Randolph Compton's youngest son was killed in World War II. Core issue areas—gender equity and population growth, human rights, and environmental degradation—emerged as the couple's grantmaking experience grew. In a similar way, the couple's interest in funding young scholars, insuring access to information and education, and fostering debate and social change became key ongoing strategies. These concerns remain at the center of the foundation's work.



Today, grand- and great-grandchildren work alongside non-family trustees to steward the founders' bold vision along with about \$60 million in assets. In 2012, distributions included \$3 million in almost 80 board grants and an additional \$600,000 in discretionary awards.

According to Jennifer Sokolove, who has been engaged in Compton's grantmaking since 2003, "It's a family that looks at the big questions. That's where their heart is. ... They're interested in thinking about what problems they see out in the world and the unique niche where a foundation like this one is needed."¹

Despite the family's long personal commitment to the arts, it took deep dialogue combined with the urging of a passionate family member to make art and artists a formal part of the foundation's strategic mix. Like many family foundations, Compton used "family advisory board" grants as a way of introducing young family members to their roles as grant makers and trustees. A few years ago, granddaughter Rebecca DiDomenico, a working artist, partnered with her cousins on the family advisory board to create a small program that supported artists focused on social and environmental change. Simultaneously, she launched a new conversation

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Ellen Friedman

among foundation board members about the potential role of art. DiDomenico reasoned that the work of social change needed to be fueled at both the emotional and intellectual levels. Artists, she reasoned, could foster change by shifting the narrative and imagining new ways to live and work. But it would be several years before arts-based grantmaking was completely integrated into the foundation's practice.

A unique opportunity for deep reflection came in 2010, when Rebecca became board chair and Ellen Friedman, formerly a vice president at the [Tides Foundation](#), was named executive director. Compton’s grantmaking, known to be thoughtful and focused, had long been open to exploration, questioning, and change. Now, with the new leadership, core questions of mission and purpose were on the table.

An external facilitator launched the conversation by asking the trustees² to describe what concerned them, what inspired them. What is it that Compton Foundation is uniquely positioned to accomplish?

What they talked about was telling. The foundation had a long history of support for legislative policy briefings, academic reports and papers, even organizing work, but as Ellen Friedman characterized it, “when people looked at where we were ... on the issues we cared most about, everybody recognized that we had a lot of data, but hadn’t moved a lot of deep, transformative change. Part of what our work needed ... was to reach people in a different way ... to touch their hearts as well as their minds to step forward to act for change.”³ And so the board—now a third of whom are practicing artists—fully embraced the arts as a core piece of Compton’s theory of change.

In December 2011, the Compton Foundation board honored its legacy and looked toward the future by adopting a new mission statement that retained its founders’ vision while speaking to today’s generations:

We ignite change. We support transformative leadership and courageous storytelling, inspiring action toward a peaceful, just, sustainable future.

In 2012, even as the foundation reaffirmed its traditional issue areas of peace, environment, and reproductive health and rights, the mantra of change reverberated in new practices and riskier exploratory grant making. For the next year, Compton announced that its guidelines would be broad, signaling its openness to new ideas. In addition, the foundation would remain sensitive to the capacity of the organizations it supported. This resulted in two core changes: to increase its responsiveness, Compton would make funding decisions up to six times a year, up from two annual docketings, while requests for general operating funds would be welcomed alongside project support and funding for small convening opportunities.



Midway Atoll project documenting dead and dying albatrosses, Chris Jordan. Photo: Chris Jordan

These administrative changes have evened out the workflow. Trustees now have direct online access to inquiries and applications, eliminating the need for extensive staff summaries or write-ups. Board and staff can focus on what motivates their work: ongoing dialogue with grantees and a deeper examination of the newly articulated strategies of “transformative leadership and courageous storytelling.”

Any formal connection between art and “transformative leadership”—where grants support leadership development, networking, and mobilizing in Compton’s core issue areas⁴—remains on the learning agenda. But by remaining open to possibilities, the foundation continues to look for opportunities at the intersection of leadership and storytelling, especially in work that makes story an integral part of engagement, organizing, and movement building.

Arguably, though none are categorized as such, they’ve already made grants at that intersection. [Air Traffic Control](#) (ATC), a network of activist artists, is, its website notes, “not an issue organization, but a technical resource and movement-building one.” ATC bridges art, leadership and social change by helping musicians and other cultural leaders learn, collaborate with each other, and develop effective strategies on a range of issues including climate change, immigration, criminal justice, and education.

ATC tells stories. To address climate change, for example, it will use its website and other social media to highlight a study on carbon emissions at live music events. Then, ATC will share resources and stories about how groups such as the Dave Matthews Band helps fans offset the environmental impact of their drive to the concert. And, it holds training sessions and retreats so that the artists in its network can learn, share stories, and become effective advocates for social change.

Notwithstanding ATC’s leadership training and movement building, the foundation’s multiple grants for the network’s activism and movement building were awarded based on Compton’s storytelling rubric. And, in fact, the connection between art and issue does fit most palpably in Compton’s characterization of “courageous storytelling.”

We believe that there is a need for compelling stories about who we are, how we should live, and our purpose on this planet. This moment of global transition requires translation. How can we imagine a new world without sharing brilliant stories about what the future could be—how it might taste, smell, sound, and feel?

The foundation’s early experience supporting film, photography and video projects played a key role in defining this emerging strategy. The [Extreme Ice Survey](#), a project launched by James Balog in 2007 that uses photography and video to document the effects of global warming on glacial ice, has been funded (through a fiscal agent, [The Wild Foundation](#)) since its inception. Balog’s book, *Ice: Portraits of the World’s Vanishing Glaciers*, and [Chasing Ice](#), a film directed about the project by Jeff Orlowski, were released in 2012.

[The Island President](#), a documentary film by Jon Shenk about peace, human rights, and the threat that climate change poses to the Maldives, received grants in 2011 and 2012. Compton also funded⁵ (through [Fractured Atlas](#)) photographer and cultural activist [Chris Jordan](#)'s work documenting the remote Pacific islands of Midway Atoll and its dead and dying albatrosses, their bodies filled with plastic from the Pacific Garbage Patch. Jordan's exhibits and speaking engagements are ongoing; a [film](#) is on track for a 2013 release.

In addition to these project grants, is general support for organizations that use storytelling to address Compton's core issues. [Magnum Foundation](#), the nonprofit arm of the well-known photo collective, educates emerging photographers and supports documentary projects created in pursuit of human rights and environmental change. Magnum, which also taps its archives to help humanitarian aid organizations tell their stories, received general support in 2012 and 2013.

[The Moxie Institute](#) makes films and art projects, holds talks, creates websites, and urges its viewers and listeners to participate, post, and tweet—to pass it on. Its latest project, [Let it Ripple: Mobile Films for Global Change](#), experiments with collaborative "cloud filmmaking" by inviting participants to submit their cell phone videos. In return, it offers free customized versions of its compilation films to organizations to advance their message and mission. Three films—about equality and interdependence, social engagement, and brain development—are available as of this writing, with a total of 15 planned in the next five years. Compton provided general support to this organization and its lead filmmaker and founder Tiffany Shlain in 2008 and 2012.



Let it Ripple: Mobile Films for Global Change

Shifting gears from this kind of direct film financing, in 2012 Compton launched a new partnership with [Impact Partners](#), a company that connects investors and philanthropists with socially concerned filmmakers. A foundation that walks the talk, Compton's sustainability policies call for it to subsidize staff's public transit costs, use recycled paper, and offset the carbon emissions generated by board travel. Investment policy plays a role, too, as the foundation seeks to reach 100 percent mission-related investments in its endowment. Its equity investment in films through Impact Partners is part of this effort. Eve Ensler's [City of Joy](#) film project was Compton's first Impact Partners investment. It will document the activist-playwright's work to heal and empower Congolese women who are survivors of sexual violence and future educators and leaders. Future film investments will be made through this collaboration.

Compton board and staff have adopted the term “activism” to encapsulate the combination of art and activism that attracts their attention. The artists that Compton supports have a social practice, not simply a studio practice. Civic engagement and social justice drive their work.

Like Jordan, Ensler, Shlain, and the musicians in the ATC network, [Eve Mosher](#) is an “artist.” Compton began its support of her work in 2011 with a small grant for [HighWaterLine](#), Mosher’s project to take environmental education to the streets. As her first large-scale public art work, Mosher used the kind of machine that lays white chalk lines on baseball fields to mark the streets of Brooklyn at 10 feet above sea level, the height waters would reach during a 100-year flood. (After Hurricane Sandy, Mosher’s blog post was titled [I never wanted to be right...](#)) The foundation’s most recent funding will help Moser expand her work to London and Miami during Art Basel Miami in 2013.



Eve Moser Discussing HighWaterLine in Battery Park.
Photos: Courtesy of Compton Foundation

Another Compton-funded “artist,” installation artist and photographer Naomi Natale, was awarded \$50,000 in 2012. [One Million Bones](#), raises awareness of today’s genocides and atrocities and encourages

activism by holding educational bone-making workshops for students across the country. In June 2013, this collaborative movement to increase global awareness will culminate in a highly visible installation of 1,000,000 handmade bones on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., along with simultaneous mini-installations in state capitals across the country.

Natale’s work is rooted in deep partnerships with a number of genocide prevention organizations, including the [Global Nomads Group](#), which connects students and relief workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo through webcasts, blogs, and video conferences, and [United to End Genocide](#), which builds networks of activists, students, artists, faith leaders, investors and survivors to prevent and end mass atrocities. Foremost among these is [CARE](#)

International, which is actively involved in rebuilding efforts in Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Certainly, the numbers of students making bones and dollars raised for partner advocacy organizations will provide Compton with some concrete measures beyond the baseline question of “was the project completed as described?” But Ellen Friedman acknowledges that for a family and a board interested in big ideas, this kind of evaluation, while important as an indication that the project might be effective, isn’t their first concern. “You may know how many workshops were conducted or, in Naomi Natalie’s case, how many bones were made, but the ultimate impact in terms of cultural shift is going to be harder to measure and longer term.”

Ellen notes, too, that there is an important difference between evaluation and learning. And while the board is still wrestling with its priorities, it has accepted the risks and opportunities of its new path. “We’re investing in possibilities, we’re investing in ideas and while absolutely we want to know what difference did this grant make, the questions take on a different character when you’re investing in possibilities and potential,” Ellen says.

This emphasis on ideas and learning is also evident in Compton’s philanthropic practice. At its final meeting of 2012, board and staff agreed that recent administrative changes—broad guidelines coupled with rolling funding decisions and an emphasis on general operating support—would continue through at least the next year. Compton’s core issue areas of human rights, gender equity, and the environment are solidly embedded, though support for work that crosses over or combines “transformative leadership and courageous storytelling” may be more evident in the future.

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Some things won’t change. Over nearly 70 years of grantmaking, the Compton Foundation has shown uncommon patience and willingness to learn. Together, board and staff recognize that it takes time to see evidence of real change. As Ellen Friedman reminds us, “Part of our role is to seed ideas, seed activities and to believe in the possibility that something will emerge from that without always being certain about what it is.”



Ann McQueen, principal at [McQueen Philanthropic](#), an advisory service for foundations and individuals, has nearly 20 years experience in philanthropy. Formerly, McQueen served on the board of Grantmakers in the Arts and led the Boston Foundation's arts grantmaking, developed a fellowship program to celebrate individual artists, and led a series of seminal research projects into the fiscal health of the cultural sector. She is a member of the boards of Boston Natural Areas Network, which preserves and advocates for urban open space, and Associated Grant Makers, a forum for New England foundations and their nonprofit partners.

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End Notes

¹ Jennifer L. Sokolove, program director, Compton Foundation, spoke with the author on November 30, 2012; all quotes are drawn from that conversation.

² Four of the eight trustees are family members; the remaining four are included based on their knowledge and expertise in the foundation's primary issue areas.

³ Ellen Friedman, executive director of the Compton Foundation, spoke with the author on November 30, 2012; all quotes are drawn from that conversation.

⁴ For a full description of what Compton means by "transformative leadership," please see the paper [Transformative Leadership in Practice](#) by Tom Davis posted on its website under [Updates from the Foundation](#) as well as Grantee News on the related [Leadership Learning Community](#) website.

⁵ Under the IRS Code, private foundations may support an individual through a scholarship, fellowship or grant for a particular purpose. However, because this grantmaking requires advance approval from the IRS and is subject to special monitoring and reporting, foundations often direct their support to artists who aren't incorporated as a 501(c)(3) through an appropriate nonprofit fiscal agent.