

May 19, 2017 - Josette Melchor is a community organizer, curator, entrepreneur, DJ, queer, Mexican woman programming life at the intersection of art and technology based in San Francisco. She founded Gray Area Foundation for the Arts—a leading nonprofit media arts center—more than a decade ago.



As told to Willa Köerner, 1827 words.

Tags: Art, Culture, Curation, Process, Inspiration, Beginnings, Collaboration, Multi-tasking.

Josette Melchor on creating something that's bigger than you

You run a center for art, technology, and social impact in San Francisco. How did you end up in the Bay Area, bridging the gap between artists and technologists?

At around 17 or 18, I was going into the arts on my own. I moved to L.A. and started working at a bank doing mortgage sales. One day at the bank this guy walked up to me and said, "You seem cool, come to my art show at this warehouse downtown." I was in art school at the time, but had never been to a warehouse art show. So I went, and I saw artists supporting themselves through these DIY community spaces. That night, I just decided to go into business with the gentleman from the bank.

Because I was working in mortgage sales, I knew how to go and lease a building. So I did. I went and leased a space downtown in L.A., got a loft, got a bunch of people together and moved in, then started curating events and music shows as a DIY underground space.

When I moved to San Francisco, I started working in technology and started to see the connection between artists and developers, code and paint. In 2008, I gave artist Aaron Koblin his first solo show at Gray Area, which was then this little passion-project gallery that was always losing money. His community of people, all these new media artists, turned up and started giving me feedback that this type of work is really important. Chloe Sladden (former Media Head at Twitter) came up to me at Aaron's show and was like, "This type of art is so important; it's humanizing technology." All these important people were coming up to me and giving me cues to keep pushing Gray Area. I felt like, "Wow, these people are so amazing and smart, and they're giving me this feedback, I've got to do something. I have to do something about this."

Can you say more about how you made it happen, and why you zeroed in on this idea as the one you wanted to devote so much of your life to?

I guess I have to be kind of careful, because when I say something—when the idea comes out of my mouth—I have to do it, no matter how long it takes. Maybe it's how I was raised. I got inspired to move into the arts when, as a teenager, I went to art museums for the first time. I had never been to museums growing up. I realized that artists could see the future, that they were really important. I remember thinking, "Hey, if I can get another young woman to see artwork, that's incredible." I didn't want my story to happen again.

So when I was 17 or 18, I decided I was going to create some kind of art center that existed beyond my lifetime. I don't know exactly how I made that decision as a teen. It's shocking to me when I talk to my peers, and they've done 20 different jobs, and keep moving around from company to company, and here I am doing the same thing since I decided I was going to do it.

After you made this promise to yourself, how did you fixate on the model of Gray Area? How did you end up running this particular type of art center?

Gray Area's never been fully mine. I'm not doing this by myself—there's a huge community of people behind me, people who have really shaped who I am, and what the organization is. Gray Area is called what it is because it exists between the intersection of art and technology. As a concept, it's a step away from genre. It's in the middle, between labels.

The finances have shaped the vision, too. It could have been a for-profit, right? But when I started working with mostly new media artists, I knew it had to be a nonprofit because there really wasn't a revenue model for the sale of digital art. Gray Area has been somehow self-funded through many types of support. We've never had a huge endowment or anything, so I've always had to be creative. I think I did stuff a little bit backwards. I should have gone and done some sort of commercial or entrepreneurial endeavor first, and figured out a way to make an endowment in my older years, and make this project happen later on.

How have you evolved the Gray Area model over time, and figured out how to deal with funding challenges

while also improving and growing the organization?

It's been difficult, and I think most nonprofit leaders deal with this. Gray Area's vision has been hard to keep consistent because of money. When we want to do a new program we have to raise new grants, and often we don't know if it's going to come through. And then when you get a big grant for a program around civic innovation that lasts for one year, then all of a sudden you're a civic innovation organization versus an art and technology organization. People get confused.

Over the years I've learned that we have to diversify our revenue streams. It's been hard to create models within Gray Area that can keep our vision in place, instead of chasing money down, or molding our vision to fit a grant. That's been a steep learning curve, but we're finally overcoming it with our new home at the Grand Theater. Now we're able to diversify our revenue streams with ticketed programming, because it's already common knowledge that when you go into this type of building, you're going to need to pay. So that's been helpful.

We also went through the legislative headache of getting a liquor license in San Francisco. And so now, our revenue streams are diversified. When you buy a drink at the theater you support Gray Area. Our education program has tuition, our incubator program has memberships, and so on. All of our programs now have earned-revenue models that are supporting the model overall, but not diluting the vision of the organization. So with that, just in the past three years, we've tried to really step away from unpredictable funding cycles. But still, we get denials from grants every month. Sometimes we're just like, "Why do we even apply?" It often feels like a waste of our time.

What particular skills or resources have you relied on to get Gray Area off the ground, and keep it going?

I keep thinking about the way I just threw myself into San Francisco, when I was working in technology sales. I used to have to run around at conferences, where my job was to give away all of my business cards. I had to introduce myself to everyone in the room, which I would find so annoying. But I met so many people, and even though I wasn't forming substantial relationships at the time, I've run into some of those people years later. Figuring out how to network, going to events, and being that person that is a little bit annoying can be really valuable years later.

How do you feel about all the hard work you pour into Gray Area, some of which I imagine doesn't pan out? How do you avoid burnout and exhaustion?

Honestly I don't think that I do avoid burnout and exhaustion. Running an organization that is responsive to communities' needs and also trying to serve so many different communities, I've realized over the years how important it is for me to have safe spaces with my own group of friends that really know me. As a community leader, there are perceptions around the organization, but there're also perceptions around who I am, what ethnicity I am, where I came from, and these sorts of things. Having a safe space with my selected group of friends and colleagues, where I can just be a weirdo, is very, very important.

Also, I'm now trying to take one or two weekends away from San Francisco every month. I've been DJ-ing fashion shows and art shows, because sometimes I just need to step away from arts administration. DJing music for a crowd has been really important for my energy.

Do you have any advice for people trying to get a new creative project off the ground? Any sage advice from a seasoned art organizer?

I remember when I specifically asked my first mentor to be my mentor—Peter Hirshberg, who's now the chairman of our board. We were just hanging out, talking about art, and he just felt like a friend. So we were just sitting there, and I literally asked, "Will you be my mentor? And help me develop Gray Area?" I remember the spark in his eyes and the way his whole tone and body movement changed. Everything shifted right at that moment, and all of a sudden I knew that I could just call him and ask him any question I wanted. I remember a similar moment with several other people, like Chloe Sladden who I mentioned earlier, who also joined our board. So my advice is: you really have to ask for mentorship and guidance. That's been really important for me.

At this point, years after you were running around meeting people at conferences, how have you come to define success for your role at Gray Area?

At this point, as Executive Director and as a community leader, my definition of success is when I have delegated almost everything, and I'm just overseeing the organization as a whole. This is really something that I've learned, and I've been so proud of my team, who have been looking out for me. They told me, "You need to check out, you've been really stressed out." So, success for me is having a really amazing team that can run the organization without me.

So success is being able to step away, and feel like the thing you created has taken on a life of its own.

Exactly. The failure for me is when everyone just thinks I am Gray Area, and that Gray Area can't exist without me—that I'm the sole person running the ship. That had potentially been true for a long time—at some points I don't even know how the hell it was running because I was doing five jobs. But yeah, this gets back to my overall goal: I want Gray Area to exist beyond me. It's my gift that I've created, to give back to culture. But it's not me.

Josette Melchor recommends:

Learning Processing

Patti Smith *Just Kids* memoir

Poemotion 1, 2, and 3 by Takahiro Kurashima

Honey Soundsystem

The Death and Life of Great American Cities by Jane Jacobs

MIT Press

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Vocation

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Fact

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