

**PART IV**

# **SUSTAINABILITY FOR THE FUTURE**





# A CULTURE TO HOLD

## THE LEADERS WE NEED

BY

**ALLISON FREEDMAN WEISBERG & SHAUN LEONARDO**

**Allison:** This is a piece about sustainable leadership and I am leaving my nonprofit Director role at the end of the year. But hear us out. I am not alone in leaving my leadership post. Some of my colleagues walked away after relatively short stints, while others tearfully closed 20+ year tenures. This “great resignation,” which is also a labor protest, evidenced exhaustion and a reevaluation of priorities as the harm of racial terror gained visibility and 6 million+ people died in a global pandemic. These conditions only placed a magnifying glass on what has long been evident: existing leadership models are antiquated, inequitable, and racist. There are countless better-researched pieces on this phenomenon, so instead we will write about a path toward something else and offer Recess as a case study. I will leave Recess because others have coalesced into an ecosystem of shared power that allows me to move on to other challenges. A key player in this network of power holders is artist and Co-Director Shaun Leonardo.



RECESS SOCIAL  
PHOTO BY MANUEL MOLINA MARTAGON





**Shaun:** In January 2021, when I became Co-Director, it was because I already had evidence that I, as an artist, could contribute to an ethos of care and accountability from within the organization—to a culture that prioritizes relationships. It is by holding its people with both care and accountability that this organization can locate power differently than traditional models. At Recess, we work with artists, system-impacted individuals, and community partners to continually foster a holistic effort toward change across our organization—pursuing new models for operations internally as well as externally in our programmatic models. The power to make these shifts - challenging how a nonprofit is supposed to operate - is felt and expressed collectively. In this work, therefore, Allison and I take up a unique position.

***"MY ROLE AT RECESS GREW OVER THE YEARS BECAUSE I SAW OPPORTUNITIES TO CONTINUE TO STEP INTO MY OWN POWER AND STEWARD THE LEADERSHIP OF OUR ARTISTS AND YOUTH."***

**Allison:** While conventional wisdom tells nonprofits to stake a fixed territory and lean into that niche, change has been our most valuable raw material. If we are to collectively hold power, we must always remain open to new input and iteration. While our mission has remained constant, our strategy and structure is engineered to evolve, pushing against the edges of policy and possibility. Over our nearly seven year partnership, Shaun and I have thought a great deal about the difference between leadership and power. Not everyone wants to lead. Leadership is burdensome; it keeps me up at night; it does not conclude with the work day. But everyone wants—indeed deserves—power, agency, choice. Shared power, which stems from deep listening and strong relationships, has always guided my understanding of how to lead with integrity, and in turn, I was given trust to make recommendations and choices based on a mutual care that flourishes within the Recess community. As I prepare to leave my leadership role, my hope for future leaders and power holders is that they trust one another generously enough to move toward equity and justice with urgency and care, and in a manner always foregrounded by deep consideration and relational work.



**Shaun:** We don't always get it right, but in seeking out a caring and accountable community we must also strive for another way to even consider what power looks and feels like. As we learn from and challenge one another in our work, staff members are openly and explicitly asked to step into their own power. Based on their lived experience and the expertise required of a particular project, staff are invited to make decisions that will drive the mission forward. From more overt programmatic changes to more subtle shifts in our messaging, this shared power requires trust—a belief in one another's commitment to our collective vision and, therefore, each individual's drive and capacity to fulfill the work. Consequently, shared power requires pouring into each individual so that they are equipped with the resources, both socioemotional and structural, to take that step—acknowledging, through an intersectional lens, that an acquisition of power looks and feels differently to each individual.

This notion of shared power, however, does not discount leadership—the skillset and determination to visualize and work toward a more promising horizon. Leadership at Recess is where the difficult questions must be asked—of our movements, of our decisions, of our ways of being.

**Allison:** As it is designed, however, leadership in nonprofit organizations is occupied with the transactional. We are asked to bundle and package social content in exchange for capital to fund programs. While my colleagues and I engage in justice work because we yearn for real structural change, meaningful intervention is only possible through a vast web of relationships and close proximity to those most impacted by harmful systems. Nonprofits rely on program participants to produce compelling data and narratives, and an Executive Director who can offer the organization's network just the right amount of distance from these participants to be convinced by their struggle without getting bogged down in the horror of the harms we've perpetrated as a nation. This is not a compelling ask for those who want an equitable world.

**Shaun:** No, it is not. Instead, the invitation should consist of a willingness to be bold, and more importantly, a willingness to fail. When I first sat down with Allison at the offer to conceive of an arts-based alternative to incarceration, I didn't blink at the idea.





In the organization's wisdom, they determined that the call to speak to the issue of mass incarceration should and could be further articulated in a manner that went beyond the echochamber of the art world. I was, therefore, compelled by the idea that a humble program, driven by an artist, could enact system intervention. Now in our seventh year, our Assembly practice diverts both misdemeanor and felony charges through arrangements with the Brooklyn DA's office, the Center for Court Innovation, and a peer to peer referral network with community partners. However, throughout the program's trajectory, what continued to pull me toward a deepening relationship with the organization was not the metrics of success as imposed by the courts, but instead, Recess' ability to evolve in response to the uncomfortable questions we needed to ask of our work. In partnership with Recess, I felt Assembly could continuously negotiate and push against the oppressive power structures that govern carceral systems. My role at Recess grew over the years because I saw opportunities to continue to step into my own power and steward the leadership of our artists and youth. Recess defines itself as artist-led in our belief that artists hold the tools to imagine fundamental change. Reimagining a more just and equitable creative community is a prerequisite for building that community. This has always been a core principle of my and so many artists' creative practices.

**Allison:** Artists must be key players in any effort that attempts to dismantle and rebuild. That is because artists are fluent in reimagination. Whether formal-a painter translating a landscape-or conceptual-an artist envisioning an alternative to incarceration-artists move through the world by creating possibility. If change is truly what we hope to bring forth, this site of imagination is fertile ground. By nurturing an artist's practice while simultaneously inviting their creative reimagination to serve as a guide, we have found new forms. Ironically, setting up a shared power and leadership structure with Shaun, ultimately served as my invitation to make my exit. Within two years, the Co-Directorship model has compounded our ability to support one another and create space for new leadership visions to thrive. This collaborative model then offered me a portal to move on and offered Recess a renewed invitation to keep changing.



While Co-Directors at Recess must still navigate the transactional element of a nonprofit structure, we aim to lead in a way that invites the people who produce the organization's content and who participate in its programs to be recognized as power holders. Directorship, consequently, is more sustainable if the work is shared and the results personally experienced. It's also less lonely and more fun.



AUDIO TRANSCRIPTION

EPISODE 4 —

SUSTAINABILITY FOR THE FUTURE

KEYWORDS

ARTISTS

DREAMING

SPACE

FIELD

REST

PROJECT

PEOPLE

ART

SHARING

COMMON

CREATED

LEISURE

SUSTAINABILITY

THINKING

FUTURE

CONVERSATION

SUPPORT

LISTSERVS

COALITION BUILDING

COMMUNITY

[Music fades in]

00:09 **Narrator 1**  
Welcome to *Common Work: Learnings for the Future from Common Field*. This is the organization's final project as it closes in December 2022. In this four-part podcast and writing series, we'll explore what we've learned together through the life, work, and closing of Common Field, a network-centered arts nonprofit organization. You'll also hear about artist-centered work pushing our field forward today, and our dreams for the future of creative sustainability from network members across the country.

Each podcast episode is paired with commissioned writings from Ikram Lakhdhari, writer and former Common Field staff member, Racing Magpie cofounder, Mary Bordeaux, with artist Clementine Bordeaux; Allison Freedman Weisberg and Shaun Leonardo, co-directors of Recess; and Common Field board members, Sarah Williams and Jackie Clay.

You can access these writings, additional episodes in the series, and project materials for Common Work: Learnings for the Future on CommonField.org through April 2023. Beyond that, you can access the project in full on our platform partner websites, including Jack Straw Cultural Center and Lohar Projects.

Thank you for listening.

[Music fades out]



You are listening to Episode Four, *Sustainability for the Future*. In this final episode, network members will discuss how they're thinking about participating in or developing new structures for sustainable creative work within our field of practice. This episode includes a conversation between Diya Vij, Curator at Creative Time and a board member at A Blade of Grass. Ayesha Williams, Deputy Director and incoming Executive Director of The Laundromat Project and Larry Osseih-Mensah, co-founder of Art Noir and a member of the Wide Awakes, a decentralized national network of artists and organizers. And now, Diya, Ayesha and Larry.

*[Music fades in and out]*

**02:21 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

Hey everyone, my name is Larry Ossei-Mensah. I'm a curator, co-founder of Art Noir and also a member of the Wide Awakes. And I am excited to be here in conversation with the Diya and Ayesha

**02:38 Ayesha Williams**

I can hop in. Ayesha Williams, currently Deputy Director at The Laundromat Project and incoming executive Director at the time that this will be released.

**02:49 Diya Vij**

Hi everyone, Diya Vij, the curator at Creative Time, I'm also on the board of The Laundromat Project and the co-chair of the board of A Blade of Grass. I feel like this is such a community of people that I respect and admire and have been following along and in dialogue with for many years, and I know have a lot to say about the future of the field and make it what we need it to be.

**03:18 Ayesha Williams**

I can jump in because I had a spot this morning. I came across this Toni Morrison quote, which is "As you enter positions of trust and power, dream a little before you think". And I just love, love that so much, just that articulation of the dream a little before you think is even like go slow and make time and space before you even get to the point where you're thinking about the thing that you're going to do so just want to offer that as of maybe a way to give us something to think about.

**03:52 Diya Vij**

I love that because I feel like the opportunity we had during COVID "season one" to really just be at our homes quietly thinking and unpacking and witnessing all that was really breaking around us and had been breaking around us was such a call to action to go slow.



And it really was this opportunity to dream a little bit. We started a think tank with 8 thinkers, artists, academics, activists, where we just spent 10 months in conversation thinking about what would we need to build. But it was the longest time I've ever been able to sit and think and talk to people without a concrete end goal just to be in that space of dreaming. And after that full year, we released all these amazing words and provocations and performance scores. But it really was not till like a year into it that we started actually designing like a real programming initiative that's coming from such a long dreaming time - of like, what's the artists need to do this really hard work of imagining better futures? And then what do we organizationally need to do to support them? Because we had time and had to gather differently, that emerged.

**05:21 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

I concur. And it's actually interesting that we open this conversation with that quote, because actually, this studio visit with an artist, William Osorio, a Cuban artist when I was in Miami, and he talked to me about this book *Leisure, The Basis of Culture* by Joseph Pieper. He talks about leisure as an attitude of the mind, a condition of the soul that fosters a capacity to perceive the reality of the world. But he also talks about, you know, leisure has been and always will be the first foundation of any culture. And so, two things I'd be curious to kind of hear your perspectives on- this reconsideration of leisure, of rest, of dreaming, of imagining is, what is dreaming mean to you? You know, what does that mean in the work that you do now? One, and then two, why -this is just a base level curious question - why did you come to the arts and cultural space, the nonprofit space as your forum to make a difference in our world in our community? We all chose a very specific route, or the route chose us, depending on how you think about things. But I'd be curious, how did you get to this place?

**06:48 Ayesha Williams**

I made my way to LP at a moment when I was feeling very frustrated, in the space that I was working in, and frustrated, because - and this might speak a little bit about what it means to dream - frustrated, because I felt boxed in. I could not figure out how to solve for, or resolve for the fact that I could not dream. I was having a dreaming block. But for me, it's interesting, like when I think about dreaming, it's even those moments of like, just sharing, and just like articulating and getting everything out in your head without any kind of forced connection making or meaning making anything. It's just like, I got this thing I need to get out. And then once it's out of my head, I can start to see and make connections and make understanding and make meaning of this thing.



And so dreaming for me is an active space. So I do see dreaming as being an action, a connecting, a sharing, just a space to download and allow things to just float in the air and at some point come back together and make sense. So I think the way that I've come to this work that I do are those moments when I have recognized that I haven't been given the space to dream, you just feel it in your body. The moments when I've made moves to move me more towards a space that feels more true, and honest, are those moments when I've actually been able to dream and share that dream with others.

**08:30 Diya Vij**

Yeah, I love this question so much, because I think there's, well, there's just so much to get into it. When I think about dreaming, I think about resting. I think about Tricia Hersey and The Nap Ministry and a kind of framework towards rest, that's political, that's anti-capitalist. That really understands our inability to rest and dream as a product of capitalism, like really big systems that kind of keep us working and away from our bodies. So dreaming and resting, I feel like it's actually such a big part of how I want to be working in the world and creating spaces and places for other people to work alongside me and with me. It's never the thing that's talked about or given time for but that dream space is actually so fertile. Like you are saying, Ayesha, is active, right? It's like we're our ancestors speak to us. It's how we connect to our lineage. It's how we connect to our day-today, it's how we think about the future. That's also what we're building for us, like more time for that connection to our own bodies and to other people and that relationship - and that that rest and leisure has been something that's really been, been taken away from us, especially communities of color, right? And it's actually like so a sense saw to the functioning of our communities.

**09:58 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

I mean, for me, it's interesting because I can say that the first time I like, was conscious of this, I think, was maybe 2018, were I actually like took the summer off. And, like I went to Greece. And I think when we talk about particular communities, it was interesting to kind of like, be on an island and like, have a coffee and like, have nothing to do and like, it was to listen to my body be like, hey, we need to be doing something we need to be planning, we need to be like XYZ. But also understanding how restorative it was, to my mind.



So I guess my question is like, how do you design within the organizations that you work in a culture of dreaming, of leisure, of responsiveness, one, but then two, personally have you kind of wrestle with that to make sure that you're holding yourself accountable to these things that you may be preaching to your colleagues and coworkers?

**11:03 Ayesha Williams**

At The Laundromat Project, introducing the practical into the conversation, as a part of our culture guide, or HR policies, we introduced about three years ago a sabbatical policy. So if you're at the LP for seven years, you get seven weeks of sabbatical. And so next year will be my seventh year at The LP. So I'm doing a little early, I got a little bit of an advance on my sabbatical. But one of the things in the way that this ties in just with personal to, one of the things I'm struggling with is the fact that we've been so conditioned to be in work mode, that it is hard for me to think about what it means to disconnect fully. I have anxiety, like real true anxiety, just around that, which is wild, the fact that we've been so conditioned to think that time to rest and reconnect with yourself and reground is anxiety inducing. But I recognize in myself, I overscheduled myself. I was like, I was going everywhere. And somebody really, like pulled me, and they were like that seems exhausting, it does not sound like fun. So I even had to rethink, like, what does rest even look like for me? And some of the things that I haven't done a lot of reflection on is like, where am I naturally at my most restful state? So I'm starting the first part of my time in New Orleans with family. New Orleans is very quiet, it's very slow, because I realized that I needed to actually force myself to be in that restful state to allow that rest to kick in. And I'm really interested and excited to actually build a practice of rest. We are a field that has chronic just like exhaustion and burnout and all the things and I am really particularly interested in how we build a space that does not cause that.

**12:53 Diya Vij**

Well, shout out to not working. I had a forced sabbatical during COVID for three months when I was in between jobs, but with severance. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me - just like having the time and space and knowing that I had enough money to get through that time, so shout out to getting that time however, it happens and can. We at Creative Time, we produce large scale, works, installation, everything we do is large scale. And so while I have a lot of time to be in that dreaming, imagining, thinking space with artists, there's still so it's still production work, right?



So like on the internal end of how our staff works, how we work, it's still like intense production work. There's a lot of moving pieces to do anything large scale, just in everything we do is unique. It's really difficult to think about how to build in rest and dreaming and pausing when you're in that kind of production work that I know you both can relate to. It's really difficult to think about what those pauses really are and how they can come into a rest practice, which I'm gonna steal from you, Ayesha, I like that.

**14:12 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

I think that's what I love about the Wide Awakes is because it's decentralized. So it's like whoever has the bandwidth kinda can just tap in and the thing gets done, right. So that you get time to rest but like someone else is picking up the slack to kind of move things forward.

**14:31 Diya Vij**

At A Blade of Grass, we're now a very newly-formed artists and art worker working board. So we're paid for our board service. Because we're paid we have different responsibilities to the work that we do at the organization and we have to show up for more hours perhaps or be more in the weeds perhaps. Something we said really early on was like, we need to just be in tune with each other's needs and where people are in their lives so that somebody can step back to take care of a family thing to, take care of other professional obligation. And we can step in, in their place. And even just having that conversation and being so mindful of it from the beginning has created that real culture of stepping up and stepping back as needed - and being more of like a shared, shared leadership in that sense. But I really am curious about the Wide Awakes model. And I want to learn more from you about that, Larry.

**15:27 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

From observation and participation, usually, it's kind of rallying around a particular moment. You know, because why always really kind of come into formation during COVID, after George Floyd. It's almost like a spin off from what, you know, Hank and crew were doing with Four Freedoms, right? Well, I think, with Wide Awakes, and just also knowing Hank, he's always been really great about utilizing the resources available, and then figuring out how to share them, right. And so I think it's about shared resources, about shared leadership, right. And you can tap into the network and just say, hey, I'm doing this thing around reproductive rights, who's aligned in his vision and this work? and people will jump in. And literally, like, I've seen things kind of manifest within 24 hours.



It's like, really amazing in terms of like, what folks can do when we're all on the same page, and utilizing all the, you know, incredible talents that we have. And it's also kind of very similar with Art Noir. None of us take a salary. And people kind of just step up around different projects that they want to see come to fruition. You know, but I think it's also, you know, been a challenge for us to kind of make sure that, you know, no one, two people are kind of holding all the weight, right. And so I like, you know, what you mentioned in terms of like, you know, being upfront about where we are, and where we need support. When we think about self, preserving ourselves, setting boundaries, I think that's an interesting question I would like to ask. Like, how challenging has it been to set boundaries, particularly post, you know, COVID? One thing that I found really frustrating is that like, you know, coming out of COVID, and people tried to put all this work on you. So I'd be curious, like, how do you set boundaries? How do you say no, because I think not all of us have like, the capacity to say, No, sometimes you gotta take the thing to pay rent, you know. So I'd be curious, like, how you've navigated it, or at least create a condition where it's not frowned upon?

**17:48 Ayesha Williams**

When I think about the future sustainability of the field, it is like really building our co-organizational ship. There's so many times when, you know, we've had conversations with Creative Time, and with Art Noir, and with all these other folks and thinking about resource sharing. There are so many think documents and resources that are emailed around, where we're literally almost functioning as if a collective body institution organization, even within our small individual entities. And so I think as we as we move and evolve, that thinking even further, that allows space where I actually don't have to take on that project or take on that initiative, and whatever I know, and intellectual knowledge I might have around that I will share it with y'all, so y'all can be in that space and do what you need to do to advance that thinking further.

**18:34 Diya Vij**

Yeah, I was just gonna say it's, it's that that requires, it necessitates something I think we're all doing the three of us especially it's like a reorientation away from competition and towards coalition. And, and a real understanding of like, well, if we together are creating this kind of net, that's like netting of support for artists, to support artists and to support the proliferation of creative expression, then what of it do I hold? And what of it do you hold?



It's such an exciting shift because that asks us to really think about an ecosystem of art and cultural production instead of just our individual missions, visions, values. I think just the more we do this, the more we're really in deep conversation and collaboration, the more we're creating foundations that are actually sustainable, like if we go to the core of what we're trying to do, which is that support artists, support ideas, and support community transformation. Like we got to do that together.

**19:35 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

I had this question around methodology and strategies for sustainability, which I think you've already kind of articulated on this coalition building, but how can we lean into that? Because I think we've been able to organically do that, right? But how can we do that in a way where it becomes mechanized to a point where like this becomes like an alternative model, an alternative infrastructure? What strategies have you seen or employed in terms of this coalition building?

**20:10 Ayesha Williams**

To me, simple is always the best way to go. So I can think of like just a practical tool, Creative Time and The Laundromat Project are a part of a consortium of 15 organizations that have been fundraising together collectively since COVID. We have formal meetings but then also just kind of sharing through opportunities and, sharing through the social calendar with each other by email. Listservs are always golden, because it is a very simple way of doing things. One way we continue to engage with alum(ni) who have come through the program - so we supported 200 artists over our 17-year history - is with the most basic Google listserv. And it literally, there's a Google group email account, and it's the most basic thing. There is no structure that's built around it, anybody can share through things. That simple, simple act of creating space for sharing and connecting with no objectives around it. But just that, you know, the information is out now.

**21:08 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

I need to get on that list.

**21:10 Diya Vij**

And that's the same spirit that we're really going into opening this programming space with.



It's going to be a Community Center for Political artists because it's really intended to be kind of participatory programs and a place where you can drop in and take a book out of the lending library, or hang out and see who else is there in hope that just by creating physical space, we're able to facilitate some of that coalition building amongst artists that are working in similar practices, here locally, but also internationally. Those listservs and virtual space are so important, they've been so essential to finding each other and finding opportunity. And I think just, we're trying to figure out how we do that and physical space, what does that look like?

**21:56 Ayesha Williams**

Definitely, in the way that you all function with Art noir, and the studio visits or the museum visits as seeing how people have created community just by moving through and joining and attending those.

**22:11 Larry Ossei-Mensah**

The virtual visits came out of just like, you know, talking to artists, understanding the power of digital and social, right, being able to tap into an artist who like may not be in like an art center. Because I always get oh, how can I get my work seen? Secondly, in terms of the visits and terms of exhibitions, and tours, and stuff like that really just came out of like, the frustration of being part of museum groups You know, because I've joined my first museum group in like 2008, 2009 and it was like, not a lot of folks that look like us, or like I was constantly fighting with the curators to go see a black artists, right. There's still a lot more work that needs to be done. But I think it's, it's been beautiful to kind of create this space that feels safe, and people can be vulnerable. And a lot of artists, particularly bigger name artists kind of love it, because it's like, okay, I don't have to perform, I can just be me. You know, we think about the future, you know, just to round this out, I think how do we just kind of continue to tap into our true self and not perform and really focus on what's going to allow me to be the best me but then also to create space where other people can be inspired and incentivized to do the same in their, you know, spheres of influence. Thank you Diya, Thank you, Ayesha.

**23:42 Diya Vij**

Thank you all.



23:43 **Larry Ossei-Mensah**

And thank you for Common Field for allowing us to hold space and have this conversation.

*[Music fades in]*

24:08 **Narrator 1**

At the conclusion of Common Field's final gathering in Seattle on October 2, 2022, attendees onsite and online were invited to share their dreams and wishes for the future of our field. Read by Common Field staff here, we offer their words to you to light the path ahead.

What do you wish for the future of arts organizing?

*[various voices]*

Sustainability

For all people to discover the artist with themselves

That money isn't the dominant factor in what happens or doesn't.

For an artist-led transformation of all paradigms

Togetherness, acceptance, and peace

To wake up with joy and expression

To move with purpose and good intention

To transform what we understand as possible

24:53 **Narrator 2**

Thank you for listening to this episode of *Common Work: Learnings for the Future from Common Field*. This project was produced with Chris Tyler and Raquel Dubois graphic design by Alexa Smithwick, and copyediting by Nicolay to K. Jack Straw Cultural Center recorded, edited and produced this podcast series. *Common work: Learnings for the Future from Common Field* was developed and curated by Sheetal Prajapati in collaboration with the Common Field team.

25:30 **Narrator 3**

The music by Josh Nucci. Common Field would like to thank the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts whose significant and ongoing support of the organization has made this work possible since 2013.