

# Participatory Arts: The Stranger Brings a Gift

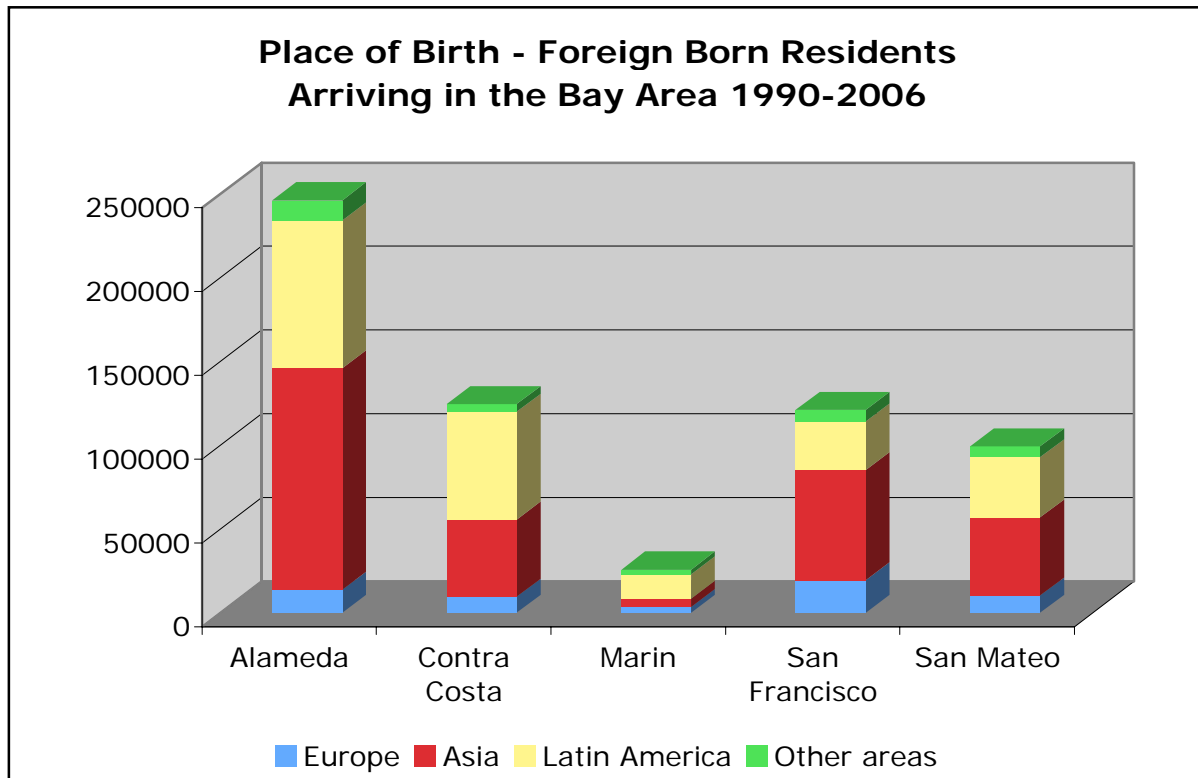
By Pia Moriarty, Ph.D.

*Many teachings hold that the stranger brings a gift, if only we can recognize and receive it.*

## Immigrant Demographics in the Bay Area

In the five-county area served by San Francisco Foundation, over half a million strangers – 617,300 new residents – arrived from foreign lands between the years of 1990 and 2006. This massive recent influx has fully doubled the foreign-born population here, expanding newcomer communities along with the economy, and bringing a surge of new energy to the Bay Area arts scene.

Almost half of these new arrivals (47.8%) come from Asia, and have settled in the largest numbers in Alameda and San Francisco Counties. Latin American newcomers account for 37.7% of those arriving since 1990, Europeans constitute 9.2%, and 5.3% come from what the U.S. Census Bureau calls “Other areas.”



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006

These are our new neighbors. Even accounting for those who have moved out of the area since their arrival, immigrants and refugees constitute a significant 29.5% of the population in

Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, San Francisco, and San Mateo Counties. This means that foreign-born residents staying in the Bay Area increased 8.4% between 1990 and 2006, showing the strongest growth in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.

### Percentage of the Population – Foreign Born Residents

County	2006 Estimate	%	1990	%	% Growth
Alameda	449,842	30.9	230,375	18.0	12.9
Contra Costa	241,516	23.6	107,060	13.3	10.3
Marin	47,538	19.1	30,489	13.2	5.9
San Francisco	270,357	36.3	246,034	33.9	2.4
San Mateo	226,525	32.1	164,767	25.3	6.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,235,778</b>	<b>29.5</b>	<b>778,725</b>	<b>21.1</b>	<b>8.4</b>

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006

More than half of these immigrants had already become naturalized U.S. citizens by 2006.

### Immigrants’ Gift: Participatory Arts That Produce Producers

Of the many immigrant gifts to the Bay Area, the most promising for arts organizations is their practice of participatory arts. Participatory arts produce audiences because they set up their audiences as co-producers.

While a participatory paradigm of artmaking is certainly not new worldwide, it stands in sharp contrast to the commercial/consumer model that dominates arts organizations in the United States. Its points of difference become apparent if we imagine an all-American mainstream arts example transformed by a more participatory approach.

Stand for a moment on the Broadway stage of A Chorus Line. Pressures on the auditioning dancers are palpable, as are their needs to validate identities as artists. The “steep and very narrow staircase” they have been climbing has limited points of entry, ever-tighter standards of judgment, and a physically imposed age limit. The near impossibilities of the dancers’ dreams make them wonderful, distilling their various desires and histories in song for the audience.

In a fine performance the audience relates to all of this, riding the emotional metaphor and going home touched and inspired. Perhaps they buy tickets to see the show again; perhaps they bring along friends; perhaps they support the arts because this experience has been so moving. There is definitely a deep sense of human engagement and sharing.

What elements would shift this scene into a participatory arts paradigm?

- The “staircase” would go up just as high in terms of artistic proficiency, but it would be much less steep, probably uneven in its ascent, and not narrow at all.
- Instead of A Chorus Line’s one all-powerful director, the audience-as-a-whole would be running the audition. Everyone in the seats would be able to provide input on hiring decisions.
- They would find ways to invite many more dancers, and dancers of varying abilities, onto the stage. Performances would multiply and diversify.
- The dancers would be old as well as young, and many would even arrive late. The audience, not the experts, would maintain the “staircase” of aesthetic achievement so it had many possible points of entry along the way.
- In short, the audience would be an actor, rather than primarily a consumer of entertainment, in the artistic process.

As difficult as it is to imagine a participatory paradigm in action on a Broadway stage, this is exactly the dynamic that operates in thousands of community arts projects in the Bay Area, and especially in newly immigrated communities. We see this creative impulse supported in dance collectives, arts stores, web design, DJ competitions, arts affinity groups on the internet, and happenings and festivals of all kinds.

Young Americans provide an all-cultures counter example to A Chorus Line’s auditions with their new practice of “poetry slams,” or competitions between high school and college teams of poets delivering their original compositions. At the beginning of each poetry slam, five volunteer audience members are chosen to be judges. Anyone can qualify, as long as they are not connected by family or emotional ties to any of the contestants. As the poets deliver their lines, audience members are active and vocal. They verbally reinforce the points as poets make them. They also judge the judges, booing low scores and clapping for the high ones. Many people, young and old, come home from a poetry slam inspired to write their own poems that very night. The entire venue encourages production and downplays artistic gate-keeping functions.

### Artistic Entry: The Power of Practice by Members

Take another example that occurs in both immigrant and long-established American neighborhoods, and across many denominations: church choirs. A choir already has an audience, the people who come for worship on a regular basis. These people are what Dutch composer Bernard Huijbers calls a “Performing Audience,” because people in the community are encouraged to join the practiced choir in making music together.

Most church choirs are composed of volunteers from the congregation. This is key: the singers are already members and have entry and identity in the larger life-world. Their singing is an expression and deepening of a shared cultural goal, to pray together. To that end they are given a lot of support: physical space, a defined role in the rituals, and perhaps even microphones, songbooks, and instruments. The cultural life of the worshipping community moves forward together, and it carries the singers with it as full members. The line between audience and artistic actors is blurred, overlapping, and permeable; this is typical in participatory arts.

The choir practices; it rehearses, but more importantly it engages socially as practicing singers. People learn as they go, but they are already within a living social context. Contrast this with the “practice your piano lessons” professional arts paradigm, with its increasingly constrained progression of pulled-out, focused study. A mentor may lead a student through recitals, competitions, and auditions, but even this does not guarantee a reliable social space where the student will be recognized as a practicing pianist. S/he may have to join a participatory arts group like the choir to achieve that status. Not surprisingly, participatory arts interact in a reciprocal continuum with formal arts.

The strength of a participatory arts paradigm is that it is based solidly in whole-culture efforts at reinforcing ongoing membership. This underlying motive allows non-arts cultural institutions to lend their established frameworks and resources to the support of aesthetic pursuits. It enables fledgling participatory arts projects to get their new blood from life-worlds that are already strong and enduring.

Participatory approaches to artmaking are not exclusive to immigrant and refugee communities, but they are intensified there. Traditional ethnic arts and festivals serve a purpose that goes well beyond culture transmission to the next generation. They serve as an open-door means for immigrants to invite connections with new neighbors and establish themselves in their new American homes. In the terms of sociologist Robert Putnam, immigrant arts groups accomplish civic “bridging” objectives by means of arts activities that, seen from the outside, may seem to be limited to in-group “bonding.” Two kinds of full membership are actually at stake: membership in the ethnic heritage group, and membership in the mainstream U.S. society. The importance of being a member is that it gives artists and arts organizations a ready entry into a world of practice.

### Social Economics of a Self-Developing Audience

In a participatory arts project, “audience development” goes beyond ticket sales and diversified marketing strategies. It implies an open invitation to join the group on stage, and to express and improve along with them. With our church choir, “audience development” means that we all learn to sing better together. The community that invites us to develop artistically is the same community that provides entry, actively recruiting us as members in a diversified web of reciprocal relationships.

Culturally speaking, this is “hard money” social capital, accumulating in what 1<sup>st</sup> Act’s Brendan Rawson calls “a gift economy.” It sets up the reality and the expectation of mutual support among its member participants. By contrast, external financing, however welcome, is inherently “soft money.” It is almost always restricted to special projects rather than organizational operating costs, and this means that programs need to be continually reframed to fit new funding sources.

Participatory arts organizations are able to spend less time hat-in-hand because they can count on cultural motivations and institutions to provide foundational resources. In many cases, immigrant arts groups are positioned to share program costs with non-arts cultural institutions; this multiplies supporters and stakeholders. In the same economic environment where mainstream arts budgets are repeatedly being cut to the bone, immigrant communities manage to reestablish their annual cycles of artistic rituals, because they are staffed by energetic armies of volunteers.

Participatory art's membership approach shortens the distance between "who pays" and "who plays," and so it can develop past the self-limitations of exclusively patronage or sponsorship models. Some participatory arts groups may have 501(c)(3) status; some may mix social services with traditional art forms; some may be entirely individually funded or staffed by volunteers. They have the same chronic needs for financial support as do formal "high culture" groups like the symphony, ballet, or opera. The difference is that participatory groups can draw support from a base of cultural membership that is shared by people from across a wider spectrum of economies and places in the life cycle than the usual "high arts" audiences, outside of subsidized (and therefore free) community performances.

Attention to the life cycle matters enormously for audience development. If young people can be members of the same cultural and artistic continuum as their parents, then both young and old are more likely to remain engaged throughout their lives. For example, there are many cultural reasons – scheduling, expense, standards of behavior and dress, etc. – why children and teenagers are effectively excluded from most symphony performances. From this point of view, it is not surprising that the average age in symphony audiences is now approaching 60. Arts organizations like the San Francisco Symphony are addressing this problem by introducing special matinees for family programming: "Give your children a gift that will last a lifetime – the unforgettable experience of live orchestral music. Our Music for Families Series is engaging and fun, a great way to pass the Symphony tradition from one generation to the next." (San José Mercury News ad, 8/28/08)

A more participatory paradigm for audience development continuously recruits actors and audience; it creates its own artistic insiders from the inside out. Outreach still means making alliances with new people, but the nature of the alliance is changed to a co-producing partnership which is more versatile, accessible, and durable than a commercial/consumer relationship aimed at entertainment.

### Immigrants Add the Intergenerational Edge

Participatory arts create a living continuum of membership, a comparatively seamless mix of arts producers and arts consumers who have the ability and the social connections to be able to shift these roles back and forth. If anyone can practice participatory arts, then what is so special about the way that immigrants practice them in the Bay Area?

Immigrant participatory arts are noteworthy because their events are energetically and invariably intergenerational. They offer a particularly effective model for recruiting young people, creating new members across the generations through a mixture of culture transmission and artistic creation.

The children move up as arts practitioners because they have been part of community artistic expressions all along; the norm has not been to separate them off into separate programs or leave them at home with babysitters for important arts events. They have learned both expressive skills and community membership norms through a kind of apprenticeship process that educators call "legitimate peripheral participation." There is less of a problem of inducting young people to engage in the arts because they have not been segregated or excluded in the first place. They have developed as artists through performances where it is not unusual for different cohorts of age and ability to take the same stage in succession.



*Young audience members get ready to perform as multi-generational dancers celebrate Mothers' Day at the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San José, 2008. (Source: Pia Moriarty)*

There is something cultural going on here. It is the difference between an arts model (equally culture-based, but understood more in terms of individual achievement) where only a select few will make it through A Chorus Line's audition and be chosen to dance, and an intergenerational membership paradigm where young dancers are a welcome part of adult programs. In mainstream ballet circles, for example, children are a regular part of one seasonal event, The Nutcracker Suite, but virtually no other adult ballet performances. In the United States, our most participatory examples of arts engagement come during Christmas celebrations when commercial motivations intersect with non-commercial traditions. Participatory arts offer the promise of this "Sing-It-Yourself Messiah" energy, any season of the year.

This energy surfaces much more regularly in newly immigrated communities, and for good reason. Adult immigrants put in hours and hours of volunteer labor to keep their heritage arts alive, so as not to lose their children as they grow up in a new place that can deeply threaten home country values. Their impressive volunteer efforts are driven by whole-culture desires to teach, protect, and stay close to their children. This motivation – not to lose the children – is the foundational dynamic, the culture transmission engine that drives immigrant participatory arts. One Indo-American college student explains, "Parents are on the moon when they see their daughters dancing: it means she cares about me, she cares about my culture." What could be more powerful?

### A Performing Audience in the Civic Arena

Their arts make immigrants effectively articulate across in-group generations, but also help them to bridge across mainstream cultural divides. Specifically ethnic expressions are often the strongest channel that immigrant communities have, for entering the wider civic society as respected adults. Immigrants and refugees have U.S. born children in numbers that roughly double their initial family size on arrival. These parents may struggle to learn English in front of their rapidly acculturating children, but they can claim full and fluent teaching authority in the practice of their heritage participatory arts.



*Sandra Mendoza and Maria Teresa Bárcenas, leaders of the participatory Teatro Familias Unidas in Eastside San José, proudly act out their struggles as immigrant mothers, providing examples of courage for their children to film and emulate. (Source: Pia Moriarty)*

The challenge for immigrants is double-sided: to reclaim and continue to shape their cultural traditions, at the same time as they work toward full membership in American society. Participatory arts provide a way for immigrant communities to practice cultural citizenship, or the right to exercise full (not second-class) citizenship at the same time as retaining and celebrating one’s cultural self. Participatory arts, no matter who is practicing them, are all about membership.

Immigrant cultural citizens are coming of age in their abilities to engage in mainstream political processes. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security reports that 181,684 California residents were sworn in as citizens last year, an annual increase of 19%, the most since 2001 and over twice as many as any other states. The San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont metropolitan area ranked fifth in the country for total number of new citizens, and this did not even count the current 14-month backlog of citizenship applications still waiting to be processed. By 2012, potential immigrant voters will be one million strong in the five counties served by The San Francisco Foundation. They constitute a significant new “performing audience” in the civic arena.

### **Potential for Immigration-Based Civic Participation by 2012**

<b>County</b>	<b>Children of immigrants who will turn 18 by 2012</b>	<b>Immigrants eligible to naturalize</b>	<b>Already naturalized adults</b>	<b>County TOTAL</b>
Alameda	43,583	124,356	214,835	382,744
Contra Costa	28,036	53,114	112,736	193,886
Marin	3,647	15,931	22,916	42,494
San Francisco	18,080	48,937	165,743	232,760
San Mateo	19,734	50,506	126,907	197,147
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>113,080</b>	<b>292,844</b>	<b>643,137</b>	<b>1,049,031</b>

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2006, as analyzed by Rob Paral & Associates in "Integration Potential of California's Immigrants and Their Children," Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR), April 2008.*

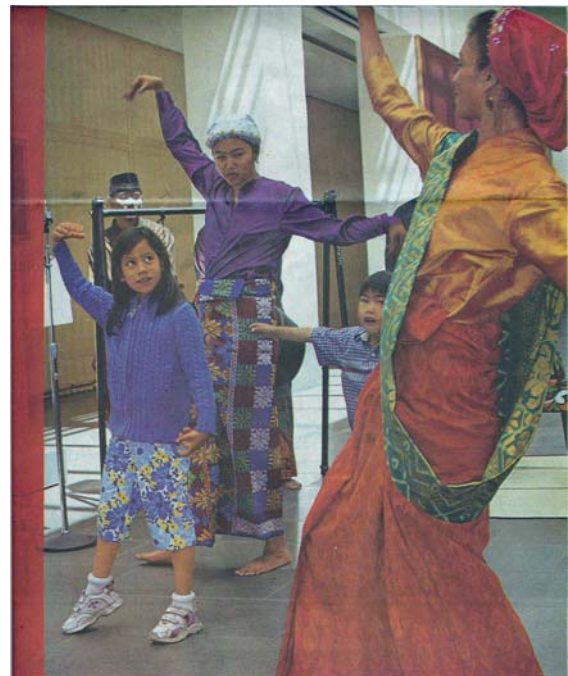
Immigrants have the potential to help reweave the civic fabric – for all of us – through their participatory arts practices and through the power of their vote. Increasingly in the context of the multicultural Bay Area, immigrant participatory arts provide effective bridges across boundaries of race, class, age, and ethnicity. Instead of reinforcing closed ethnic enclaves, cultural celebrations from diverse heritages begin to open the doors between neighbors and neighborhoods. Theirs is a largely untapped source of beauty and hopefulness, a renewable source of almost solar energy for a shadowy time.

### The Stranger Brings a Gift

The gift that these talented strangers bring to Bay Area arts organizations is a reconnection with the participatory power of intergenerational groups, and a reminder that human beings want to produce art, not just consume it as entertainment.

Anyone can practice participatory arts, but California’s immigrant communities are exemplary in the ways that they regularly incorporate youth into a broad-based and growing spectrum of artmaking. Immigrant arts groups offer best practices that naturally draw in young people as both producers and consumers of the arts; this is because their normal cultural programming model is intergenerational.

Target Corporation is already using this multigenerational approach as a marketing tool in full-page ads promoting their support for family programs at Bay Area arts museums with headlines that proclaim, “Celebrate Art, Culture, and New Family Memories” at the Asian Art Museum (4/13/08). Similar ads urged parents to “bring your kids” to the deYoung Museum (6/6/08), and to a free Symphony Silicon Valley concert, “a family celebration on the last Sunday before school starts,” in the meadow next to the Children’s Discovery Museum in San José (8/18/08).



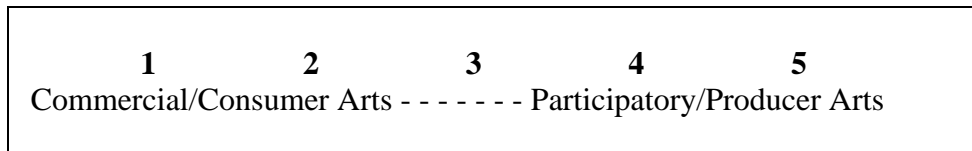
*Target Corp. advertisement [San Jose Mercury News](#)*

At a time when non-profit arts organizations are particularly vulnerable to the economy’s protracted woes, the participatory model of “informal,” “folk,” “amateur,” or “unincorporated” artistic production is vibrant and resilient. Participatory arts offer a working alternative for non-profits that will always struggle to survive when they are forced to compete on the terms of a commercial arts model. A participatory approach to artmaking creates a space of freedom, a community-based cushion against the pressures of American consumer culture and its profit-funded standards for fundraising and audience development.

Today, while the formal arts are suffering a kind of financial “energy crisis,” new immigrants to the Bay Area are demonstrating that the arts can continue to thrive in a larger context where cultural forces provide renewable resources. The cultural engine that drives immigrant parents to

volunteer their labor for traditional arts celebrations for their children is the same force that enables their arts groups to continue even in times of economic recession. More participatory approaches will also allow mainstream arts organizations to connect with their own cultural engines.

For planners, the growing numbers of immigrants and the aesthetic power of their participatory arts suggest a new yardstick that may be useful for assessing the audience development potential of future arts initiatives.



Immigrant experiences support the argument that intergenerational projects, and projects scoring higher on this simple scale, will be more likely to generate enduring and supportive memberships for arts organizations.

#### Internet Resources about Participatory Arts

- [www.ci-sv.org](http://www.ci-sv.org) archive site for Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley
  - Maribel Alvarez, There's Nothing Informal About It: Participatory Arts Within the Cultural Ecology of Silicon Valley, 2005.
  - John Kreidler and Philip J. Trounstine, "Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress Toward A Vibrant Silicon Valley," 2005.
  - Pia Moriarty, Immigrant Participatory Arts: An Insight Into Community-Building in Silicon Valley, 2004.
- [www.gcir.org](http://www.gcir.org) Grantmakers Concerned With Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR)
- [www.fieldmuseum.org/par/](http://www.fieldmuseum.org/par/) Center for Cultural Understanding and Change
- [www.communityarts.net](http://www.communityarts.net) Community Arts Network
- [www.youthspeaks.org](http://www.youthspeaks.org) Youth Speaks  
*"...because the next generation can speak for itself"*

---

Commissioned by The San Francisco Foundation and Grants for the Arts/San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund through support from The Wallace Foundation.