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# A BLADE OF GRASS

## **A Blade of Grass Announces Significant Changes to Board Model, As Part of Ongoing Evolution of Organization**

### **New Board Structure Supported by a Generous \$450,000 Gift from Shelley Frost Rubin**

**New York—March 17, 2022—**A Blade of Grass (ABOG), the national nonprofit that supports socially engaged art, announced today the next step in its multi-year restructuring process, first announced in September 2020. To encourage greater accountability and support responsible ongoing stewardship of the organization, ABOG will shift to a paid, professional board structure. As part of this decision, the board will be scaled from 11 to six members following a transition period that will conclude in late spring. The six-member board will include Brett Cook, Michael Quattrone, and Michael Premo, who have been on ABOG’s board for a number of years, and Diya Vij, Gregory Sale, and Ashley Sparks, who formally joined in January 2022. The members choosing to step down in support of this transition to a paid, professional board structure include Shelley Frost Rubin, Annette Blum, Eva Haller, John Osborn, and Lee Skolnick.

The group that will continue in board leadership is comprised of artists and arts workers, who have deep experience in socially engaged art and have served in a variety of roles as curators, educators, and community organizers. The decision to establish a paid board is an outcome of a series of listening sessions led by ABOG’s current Executive Director Deborah Fisher with prior ABOG fellows and collaborators as well as a broad swath of community leaders and creative practitioners between 2020 and 2021. The listening sessions are part of the organization’s commitment to rebuild the organization with input from key stakeholders and in ways that are sustainable through time. The sessions also revealed the incredible importance of having board and leadership, who are themselves artists and arts workers with an understanding of the interests and needs of the artists that the organization serves.

“Museums and arts nonprofits have been grappling with board crises over the past several years, and we took this pandemic moment—which revealed the precarity of our own position as an organization—to explore an alternative model that we feel is conducive to responsible stewardship. By establishing a paid, professional board, we aim to encourage consistent engagement and leadership among board members who have a clear stake in our work and to center the expertise of people who care deeply about our work but might not be able to give their time on a purely volunteer basis. We believe that by offering paid board positions, we can open the door to a far more diverse group of voices with both varied and highly relevant experience,” said Fisher.

The existing 11-member board is currently working with an attorney and compensation consultant to transition the board structure. It is expected that the compensation consultant will determine a reasonable compensation for the remaining six members of ABOG’s board probably within a range of \$10,000 to no more than \$15,000, paid as an annual honorarium. This compensation for the board’s participation in strategic planning, set meetings and correspondence, and advocacy to ensure the organization is living up to its mission and is operating with financial responsibility, as well as to serve as ambassadors for ABOG’s vision and work will follow market practice for many nonprofits, including member

organizations and private foundations. The honorariums are supported by a generous gift of \$450,000 from Shelley Rubin, who founded ABOG in 2011. This gift, which provides a minimum of three years of financial support for the new structure, concludes Rubin's formal engagement with the organization, which she has supported with vision and energy for more than a decade.

"I have always believed, and continue to believe, that artists are the leaders that we need to enact social change. For more than a decade, it has been my great pleasure to support the artists with whom A Blade of Grass has collaborated and to experience their incredible vision, passion, and commitment to community. As our organization embarks on a reset, we are dedicated to listening to artists and to our community partners to understand how we can serve them, and by extension the public, well into the future. I am delighted to give this gift to support A Blade of Grass's new board structure and to conclude my board service by making essential space for new, diverse voices to carry the organization forward," said ABOG founder and outgoing board member Shelley Frost Rubin.

"I have long believed that ABOG has the potential and, in fact, the duty to transcend the conventional not-for-profit organizational structure. By embarking on this exciting journey of reflection and restructuring, we can hope to achieve what other arts groups never have: to create an organic, living entity that is an embodiment of the essence of what socially engaged art truly is. We are confident in this decision, grateful to Shelley for her generosity, and excited to create a pathway for new perspectives and approaches," added outgoing board member Lee Skolnick

The listening sessions conducted by Fisher also revealed the importance of ABOG's highly regarded Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art, which operated between 2014 and 2020 and during that period served 57 artists and artist collectives from across the world. Artists indicated in particular that opportunities for support for socially engaged art projects were scarce even as this work has increased in relevance and significance. Reestablishing this type of support for socially engaged artists, whether through a re-envisioned fellowship or another model of support, is essential to ABOG's vision for its future, and the organization looks forward to making additional announcements about plans in the coming year.

"ABOG has long endeavored to institutionally model the work that it supports, to behave much like a community engagement practice in itself. This most recent iteration towards a new board structure and organizational direction represents the continued evolution of ABOG's purpose and will enhance our abilities to support creative communities of social change that are transforming power through action and intention. We look forward to sharing more news about our future directions," said Brett Cook, a member of ABOG's continuing board leadership.

### **About ABOG's Continuing Board Members**

**Brett Cook** is an interdisciplinary artist and educator, who uses storytelling to distill complex ideas and creative practices to transform outer and inner worlds of being. His projects typically involve community workshops and integrated arts experiences that establish connections between art making, daily life, and healing. He has received numerous awards, including the Lehman Brady Visiting Professorship at Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Richard C. Diebenkorn Fellowship at the San Francisco Art Institute. Cook was selected as cultural ambassador to Nigeria as part of the U.S.

Department of State's 2012 smARTpower Initiative. His work is in private and public collections, including the Smithsonian/National Portrait Gallery, the Walker Art Center, and Harvard University. In 2009, he published *Who Am I In This Picture: Amherst College Portraits* with Wendy Ewald and Amherst College Press, and in 2016, *Clouds In A Teacup* with Thich Nhat Hanh and Parallax Press. He is currently the inaugural Senior Fellow of visual arts at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

**Michael Quattrone** is an artist and philanthropist, who is particularly interested in the interplay between arts, social and environmental justice, and wellbeing. Together with his wife, actor and communal theater maker Kala Smith, the pair founded, in 2011, Hearthfire, a non-profit retreat organization that offers experiences of earth, art, and heart to a community of creative spirits in the Hudson River Valley. Quattrone's practice of experiential learning also includes 11 years with the Hero's Journey Foundation. He has taught in the Theater Arts and Studies program at Johns Hopkins University and co-curated the KGB Monday night poetry series in the East Village. More recently, he has been writing, recording, and performing music as One River. Wolfe Island Records released his album in 2018. In addition to *A Blade of Grass*, he serves on the boards of the David Rockefeller Fund, The Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors.

**Michael Premo** is an artist, photojournalist, documentary producer, and strategist. He has created, produced, and presented original art and media with numerous companies, including Hip-Hop Theater Festival, The Foundry Theater, The Civilians, Penny Arcade, Company One, EarSay, Inc., and the Peabody Award winning StoryCorps. He's a co-creator and Executive Producer of *Sandy Storyline*, a participatory documentary that collects and shares stories about the impact of Hurricane Sandy on our neighborhoods, our communities, and our lives. Premo also co-created the multimedia storytelling project *Housing is a Human Right*, a project connecting diverse communities around housing, land, and the dignity of a place to call home. His radio documentaries have been broadcast internationally and his photography has appeared in numerous outlets including *Left Turn*, *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, *Narrative.ly*, and *Het Parool* (Holland). In addition to *A Blade of Grass*, Premo is on the Board of Trustees of the Network of Ensemble Theaters.

### **Gregory Sale**

Collaborating with individuals and communities on aesthetic responses to social challenges, Gregory Sale creates and coordinates large-scale and often long-term public projects. For close to 20 years, his work has focused on issues of mass incarceration. System-impacted individuals and communities help conceptualize social-aesthetic structures, co-produce artistic components, and direct the advocacy intention of the work. More specifically, Sale has undertaken a series of projects focused on reframing the narrative of reentering society after incarceration, culminating in *Future IDs at Alcatraz* (2018-2019). This yearlong, socially engaged project, exhibition, and programmatic series was created with core-project collaborators Dr. Luis Garcia, Kirn Kim, Sabrina Reid, and Jessica Tully and in partnership with National Park Service, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, and 20 community organizations. Since the onset of the pandemic, Sale and a group of system-impacted leaders have formed the *Future IDs Art and Justice Leadership Cohort* to expand their understanding of the power of artistic production to support justice reform and to further their effectiveness as catalysts of social change. His work has received support from Kenneth Rainin Foundation, Creative Capital Foundation in Emerging Fields, *A Blade of Grass/David Rockefeller Fund Fellowship in Criminal Justice*, *Art Matters*,

SPArt (Social Practice Art), the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and artist residency awards (Yaddo, MacDowell, Grand Central Art Center, Headlands, Montalvo, Ucross, and Centre d'Art Marnay Art Centre). Based in Phoenix and Los Angeles, Sale is Associate Professor of Intermedia and Public Practice at Arizona State University.

**ashley sparks** is a Southern theater maker, facilitator, and convening curator. sparks co-directs the theater ensemble Mark-n-Sparks along with Mark Valdez and leads the work of spark + dive, inc. As an artist, sparks has worked across the US with companies such as Cornerstone Theater Company in Los Angeles, ArtSpot Productions in New Orleans, PearlDamour, the Network of Ensemble Theaters, Alternate ROOTS, the Network for Energy Water and Health in Affordable Buildings, and the Natural Resources Defense Council. As a director, sparks creates site-specific work and immersive participatory events. spark + dive has worked with dozens of individual artists, filmmakers, and organizations to deepen the connection art can have on specific audiences and across sectors. As a convener, sparks organized the Network of Ensemble Theaters MicroFest USA, a festival/think-tank series that highlighted the impact art has in revitalizing communities and the Network of Energy Water and Health in Affordable Buildings national convenings. sparks is an awardee of the Princess Grace Award, A Blade of Grass Fellow, has an MFA in Directing and Public Dialogue from Virginia Tech University, is a certified coach, a member of the Guild of Future Architects, and a facilitator with the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute.

**Diya Vij** is the Associate Curator at Creative Time and is committed to critically investigating the evolving role of public art in politics and civic life. Over the past decade, she has held programming, curatorial, and communications positions at major New York City Institutions. At Creative Time, she commissions and stewards large-scale public artwork, initiates public programs, and helps guide the curatorial direction of the organization. As the Associate Curator of Public Programs at the High Line, she organized dozens of live events and performances with artists, activists, practitioners, and healers. At the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, Vij launched and co-directed the Public Artists in Residence (PAIR) program. Additionally, she helped lead the Agency's citywide Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiative, and played an active role in public monument efforts, as well as CreateNYC—New York City's first strategic long-term plan for culture. She was a curatorial fellow and the communications manager at the Queens Museum from 2010–2014. She currently serves on the Board of the Laundromat Project.

### **About A Blade of Grass**

A Blade of Grass is a New York-based arts nonprofit dedicated to social engagement. The organization is guided by the core beliefs that artists have essential roles to play in fostering critical conversations on social change and creating new systems and structures that benefit our communities and our lives. A Blade of Grass collaborates actively with artists to realize their visions for specific socially engaged projects or programs, offering a variety of tools that amplify artists' work and build their audiences. It produces public programs, workshops, performances, installations, and other community actions that raise the visibility of artists who are creating change in communities through art.

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