

[Liza Eckert](#)

Art in Unlikely Spaces



with [Vishal Persaud](#), [New York City News Service](#), May 27, 2010

Meditation rarely happens in an open storefront at noon in midtown Manhattan. But on a recent Monday, curious passersby stopped short at the sight of two men who sat cross-legged, staring straight ahead, on a sidewalk on West 44th Street. Inside, four more people meditated in tranquil serenity behind the plate-glass window during the lunchtime rush.

Your taxpayer dollars at work.

The Interdependence Project, an educational non-profit dedicated to Buddhist teachings, was hosting a performance-art installation – thanks, at least in part, to the economic stimulus.

The group gained access to the space through [Chashama](#), an organization that received \$50,000 from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act through the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (NEA), which has allowed them to continue placing galleries in vacant stores all over the city.

“It’s an economic stimulus because it keeps the artists in New York and it also helps businesses,” said Anita Durst, founder and artistic director of Chashama. “When you bring artists to those spaces, they’re using the coffee shops, they’re using the delis, they’re using the hardware stores and they’re creating an activity that is healthy for the community.”

Chashama, which has been working with landlords and building owners to fill vacant storefronts with colorful art and performances for 15 years, used the stimulus money to hire two new employees to expand the number of spaces they manage.

Chashama's ability to take on these spaces and make them available indirectly benefits groups like the Interdependence Project. Without access to these spaces, the project would have to find other venues to host their installations.

"This is a mindful and creative way for us to engage the public," said Josh Adler, arts coordinator for The Interdependence Project. "So this is not only performance, it's not only a chance for people to meditate, but when we work with Chashama and go to a different space, it also gives us a way to engage our civic society."

Although a large portion of the \$787 billion stimulus funds are targeted at "shovel-ready" infrastructure projects, the plan funneled \$50 million to the arts. Advocates say the arts money can have a more immediate impact.

Urban infrastructure projects can take months or years to plan, which delays the creation of many jobs, but artists begin to hire and spend as soon as they receive grant or loan money, said Victoria Hutter, spokeswoman for the National Endowment for the Arts, which is distributing the stimulus money to arts programs across the nation.

"Artists and art administrators are workers just like anybody else," she said.

The NEA grants are generally \$25,000 or \$50,000 per award. Durst said she eliminated two positions early in the recession – one in 2008 and another in early 2009. She was able to replace them after receiving the grant in 2009 and hired new employees in June and September.

"We actually found employees who were more qualified and better at the job," she said. "We're now able to do more things we couldn't do before."

Chashama is just one of 1,300 arts organizations in New York City that generate \$3.1 billion in revenue annually. It's a small part of the city's \$544 billion economy – but an important one.

It's hard to put a dollar sign on the value of the arts industry because it has a different kind of value to the city, said Steven Dubin, professor of arts administration at the Columbia University Teachers College.

"The impact is intangible," he said.

New York received more NEA recovery money than any other state, with 139 grants totaling \$6 million. Of that, 123 grants, worth more than \$5 million, are going to organizations in New York City like [Jazz at Lincoln Center](#) and the [Apollo Theater](#) in Harlem.

And some say that's still not enough. NEA president Rocco Landesman, a former Broadway theater producer, along with actors Jeff Daniels and Kyle MacLachlan, [addressed Congress](#) in April to ask for more funding.

The money effected institutions both large and small in areas like dance, theater, and visual arts. But the money can affect more than just the artists.

Chashama is filling five more empty buildings in neighborhoods across the city, including two in Sunset Park, Brooklyn, two in Jamaica, Queens and one in Manhattan. Durst said these temporary galleries liven up a neighborhood and bring in artists who wouldn't otherwise be there. And the two new jobs are in no way frivolous for the employees.

"If I had not received the position, I'd still be interning somewhere else – unpaid," said Devin Mathis, who was hired as a programming assistant because of the stimulus grant. A grad student at the Pratt Institute, she said she likes being able to take what she learns at school and almost immediately apply it at her job.

One drawback of the NEA recovery money is that it is a one-time grant. Groups can use the money to get out of a financial slump, but come next year, they'll be on their own. Hutter said they can apply for other NEA grants down the road.

"It's up to them to figure out what they need going forward," she said.

This situation – receiving a grant and having to find more money elsewhere in the future – is par for the course for anyone who works in the arts, said Dubin. Artistic organizations often hobble from one funding source to another, and they are generally first to get cut, he said.

"Insecurity is the basic way arts and art organizations operate," he said.

Randall Filer, a labor economics professor at Hunter College, said the stimulus funds are an important stopgap, filling some of the void in donations left by the recession.

"They reduced the downsizing in support for arts, but that's all they did," said Filer. "So they enabled more previous programs to be preserved, but they didn't create any new incentives."

Durst said Chashama is looking toward the future by talking to potential donors and looking for grants to make sure the people that have been hired can keep their jobs.

"It's been a worry of mine," Durst said. "But I think we're going to be able to replace it."