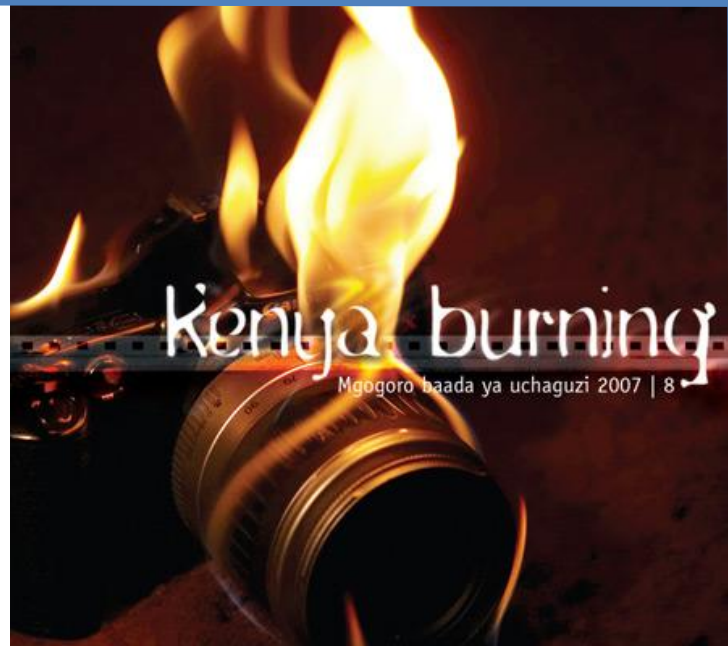


Lambent Foundation

Art. Culture. Justice.

By Ann McQueen



*Kenya Burning: Never Forget
Never Again*, a project of GoDown
Arts Centre, Nairobi

This Funder Portrait is part of a series of brief papers and podcast interviews featuring funders who are supporting arts and culture as a creative strategy to achieve community building and development goals, civic engagement, or social justice goals. Visit the [Animating Democracy](#) website for other Funder Portraits and [Resources](#).

Listen to a [podcast interview](#) by Ann McQueen with executive director of the Lambent Foundation **Michelle Coffey**.

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[Lambent Foundation](#) leverages the critical role of arts and culture at the intersection of social justice. Through its grantmaking and creative programs, Lambent explores the impact of contemporary art as a strategy for promoting sustainable cultural practices in New York City, New Orleans, and Nairobi. Lambent, founded by an individual philanthropist in 2009 as a donor advised fund and project of Tides, averages about \$4 to \$5 million in grants to arts and cultural organizations each year. In addition to grantmaking, Lambent actively connects the artists and arts organizations it works with to national and international networks of artistic practice that extend the foundation's impact beyond its core cities. It also operates an appointment-only exhibition space in Manhattan's Financial District.

Lambent: shining or glowing softly; softly bright or radiant; marked by lightness or brilliance, especially of expression; playing lightly on or over a surface, flickering, e.g. *lambent* sunlight glinting off the waves.

The Lambent Fellows came first. In 2002, philanthropist Anne Delaney launched the Starry Night Fund to support a variety of social justice activities that included arts and culture, women and girls, racial justice, human rights, and progressive movement building around the world. A year later, she established a scholarship fund and annual selection committee process to make direct fellowship grants¹ to New York artists who were working at the intersection of art and social change. Over the next five years, 31 artists would receive three-year, unrestricted, \$21,000 grants based on the brilliance of their vision and work. Just as Anne was drawn to the sheen of lambent light, wanting to see more, so she wanted to see more of these artists' radiant work.

With a similar intention—to see and encourage more of such brilliance by being open and attentive to what was happening in the world of art and social justice—the [Lambent Foundation](#) was established in January 2009 as a donor advised fund (DAF) and project of Tides to focus exclusively on the intersection of art, artists and social justice. The sun set on grantmaking at the Starry Night Fund.

Michelle Coffey², executive director of the Lambent Foundation, cites a number of reasons for setting up a donor advised fund³ rather than a stand-alone private foundation. [Tides](#), she notes, is “an effective and efficient grantmaking vehicle” that provides the back-office infrastructure needed to keep the Lambent operation small, enabling it to send more money into the field. Their grants management services are particularly helpful to Lambent’s international grantmaking, which carry additional IRS expenditure responsibility requirements.⁴ Whether the funds are to be directed internationally or within the States, once the foundation staff and donor have completed their internal review and recommended a particular grant from the donor advised fund, Tides takes over to conduct due diligence⁵ and deliver the grant as quickly as possible.



Michelle Coffey, executive director

The choice to go with Tides was also made, Michelle says, because of the match between Tides' core vision and Lambent's desire “to be in a deeper partnership and support a necessary progressive philanthropic infrastructure.” And importantly, the Tides relationship helps the donor support the good work of others anonymously. Delaney is clear: it's about supporting the work, not her ego.

Michelle Coffey, who began working with the donor in 2002, shares her commitment to a unique mix of art, creative programming and progressive philanthropic practices. Two phrases recur frequently in any conversation with her: “intentional” and “grantee partners.” These words are at the soul of Anne and Michelle’s work.

Lambent’s philanthropic practice is highly considered and intentional, from the choice of Tides to the emphasis on artist-centered organizations and its thoughtful efforts to connect and partner with the people who share the donor’s values.

The foundation’s lean staff—only 2.5 FTEs—coupled with its commitment to fund the work rather than administration dictated its invitation-only process. But, because intentional openness and networking is central to their philanthropic practice, this does not translate into a closed system that admits only a favored few. Lambent’s RFP asks its invited applicants to name their current collaborators and who they would like or need as collaborators as a way of building donor and staff knowledge of the field. This practice also helps Coffey reach out beyond the current grantee cohort to invite selected arts organizations into the fold. For example, after several New York arts publications noted that the online magazine [Triple Canopy](#) was a valued partner, it received an invitation in 2011 followed by grants in 2011 and 2012.

An overarching focus on aesthetics differentiates Lambent from many other funders focused on art and social justice. As is evident in a list of its recent grants, Lambent’s primary allegiance is to the artist, not the issue or campaign for change. Lambent asks whether the applicant organization is artist-centered and includes working artists among leadership and on its boards. Did an artist found the organization? Is the focus of its mission or key programs, Coffey asks, “to elevate a platform upon which artists can stand and thrive?” Does the organization work in partnership with others? Does it know its place and role within the field? Is it pushing boundaries?

By not specifying an interest in particular issue areas, Lambent follows the artists’ leads as its grantmaking focuses on larger, systemic issues. “We don’t necessarily use the word ‘social change.’ We are really speaking about ‘social justice.’” Grant decisions are made through a lens of justice and equity, so race, class and gender are key filters. Other funding criteria, according to Coffey, are “a unique combination of the artistic practice, the aesthetic structure, and the intention around a critical social justice issue. ... We look at not just individual inequities; we look at structural challenges. ...The work needs tobe not only on a relevant topic, but is engaging a relevant question within that topic and is nuanced a bit.”

That said, Michelle Coffey concedes that while “the environment was never a big grand arena for us ... we had two unique opportunities come to us.” The first was “[The Value of Water](#),” an “aesthetically stunning” exhibit of work by the likes of Bill Viola, Kiki Smith and Robert Longo installed in the bays, chapels, and walls of New York’s [St. John the Divine](#) from September 2011 through March 2012.

Similarly, Lambent’s flexibility allowed it to make a one-time grant to [Paul Winter’s](#) environment-inspired project. Most of the foundation’s grantees work in the visual or literary arts, not music, but Winter would be an exception in that arena, too. He had been making field recordings of the migratory birds that were crossing from South Africa to Ethiopia before flying on to Europe and Asia when he met indigenous musicians and formed them into the Great Rift Valley Orchestra. In addition to raising awareness of Africa’s Great Rift Valley flyway, Winter’s [Flyways](#) project promotes the musical traditions and musicians of Africa and, Lambent’s website says, “awaken[s] a spirit of involvement in the preservation of wildlife, wilderness and the Earth.” Coffey is even more expansive: this grant to Flyways was “a great opportunity to support this artistic visionary work that illuminated so many issues through beauty.”

Those stand-alone grants aside, Lambent tends to form deep, long-term partnerships with a core group of grantees that are passionately artist-centric. In New York, this includes organizations such as [Creative Capital](#), [Creative Time](#), and [The Kitchen](#), all of which provide the infrastructure that innovative, engaged artists need to create and present their work, build careers, and shape society. Creative Capital provides funding, counsel, and career development services to artists across the country, while Creative Time commissions and presents public art projects, as its website says, “throughout New York City, across the country, around the world—and now even in outer space.” The Kitchen—of the three, the only one rooted in a building and black box theater—presents cutting-edge exhibitions, screenings and performances that resonate nationally and internationally.

As a Manhattan-based funder, Lambent is acutely aware of the vastly different cultural landscapes of New York, Nairobi, and New Orleans as it makes funding decisions. For example, the cultural leadership of Nairobi, Coffey points out, is not solely focused on that urban area. Nairobi is the hub of the east African region, making Lambent’s grantmaking there much different than its application in the States. She notes, too, that “We can’t necessary apply our desires and wishes for our grantee partners here in New York on New Orleans without understanding ... the lack of infrastructure there and the hindrances this may cause to working artists.”

In fact, growing each city or region’s infrastructure and capacity to support individual artists is a core concern. Nationally, this plays out in awards to the [National Performance Network](#), which supports artists in the creation, performance, and exhibition of new work and provides crucial fiscal sponsorship services to New Orleans artists. In New York, there are grants to the [Northern Manhattan Arts Alliance](#), [Harlem Stage](#) and the [Lower Manhattan Cultural Council](#). Ever flexible and responsive, in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, Lambent partnered with [The Andy Warhol Foundation](#) and the [Robert Rauschenberg Foundation](#) to establish an emergency relief fund administered by the [New York Foundation for the Arts](#).

In New Orleans, Lambent’s support of the local creative infrastructure continues to respond to the effects of Hurricane Katrina. [Prospect New Orleans](#), a large-scale international art biennial in the tradition of the Venice Biennale that contributes to the cultural economy of the Louisiana

Gulf region, has been funded since 2009. Similarly, the DAF is a long-term supporter of the [Ashé Cultural Arts Center](#), an artist-founded community development agency and 18,200 facility “designed to utilize culture to foster human development, civic engagement and economic justice in the African-American community.”



[Prospect New Orleans video](#)

Outside of the United States, Lambent’s artist-centered grantmaking is similarly focused on building supporting networks and organizations of and for local artists. [Kuona Trust](#) is a visual arts center that promotes the role of Kenyan artists by providing mentors, resources and a platform for residencies, workshops, exhibits, sales and connections with other artists. Likewise, Nairobi’s

[GoDown Arts Centre](#), located in a renovated warehouse, provides space for rehearsals, performances, screenings, and exhibitions. Both organizations tap into broader African and international networks to expand the impact of their work with local artists. For instance, GoDown’s 2011 events included an arts management seminar by Michael Kaiser, dance performances by a German company, and an urban planning workshop with a group of architects from Sweden.

The real power of these networks is often intensely local. In response to the overwhelming violence of the 2007 Kenya elections, GoDown musicians came together in song and prayer, Kwani Trust published poetry and prose, and Kuona Trust painters and sculptors exhibited and sold work to raise funds for the displaced. Most powerfully, just five months after the elections, GoDown created “[Kenya Burning: Never Forget Never Again](#),” a touring exhibit and book of documentary images of campaigning and post-election destruction by nine amateur and professional photographers. It is hard to imagine a better illustration of Lambent’s mission to “leverage the critical role of art and culture and at the intersection of social justice.”

Sprinkled among its artist-centered grants list, there is also evidence of the donor advised fund's interest in supporting bridges between the arts and what it calls "progressive philanthropic infrastructure." This includes support of arts activities at the 2010 [Women's Funding Network](#) conference and the pre-conference activities for artists, curators and arts administrators at [Applied Research Center's Facing Race 2012 Conference](#). Similarly, Lambent partners with [The Opportunity Agenda's Creative Change](#) retreat, which brings together artists, advocates, cultural organizers, and donors working "at the intersection of arts and social justice" and is among the funders of [Animating Democracy's IMPACT Initiative](#), [Arts & Social Change Mapping Initiative](#), and the 2010 [Trend or Tipping Point: Arts and Social Change Grantmaking](#) report.

Noting that their grantee partners are some of the strongest thinkers in the field of socially engaged art making, Coffey is also deliberate about linking them to each other, both within and outside their regions. In 2012, instead of making one-to-one site visits across east Africa, Coffey brought local grantee partners together for workshops, lectures, and dialogue within the broader context of the [Arterial Network's African Creative Economy Conference](#) in Dakar. And when the editor of the [Kwani? Journal](#), the publication of the Kenyan literary network [Kwani Trust](#), had a speaking engagement that brought him to New York, Lambent hosted a lunch so that he could meet and make new colleagues of editors from [BOMB](#), [Cabinet Magazine](#) and [The New Press](#).

This kind of intentional networking is also fostered through Lambent's exhibition space in its building in Manhattan's Financial District. Though security mandates it be open only for events or by appointment, the space hosts curated exhibits—visual dialogues—by pairs or small groups of artists that might not otherwise work together. A listing of recent exhibition titles hints at Lambent's unique mix of aesthetics and social justice: "[Right to Return, River Road, NOLA Now!](#)" about pre- and post-Katrina New Orleans; "[Pixelating: Black Image in the Age of Digital Reproduction](#);" and, "[Aesthetic Justice](#)" which explored the intersections between artistic practice and human rights.

In 2012, Lambent distributed about \$5 million through about 80 grants—a huge number of organizations and activities for a small staff to process, monitor, and evaluate. Admitting to struggling with evaluation, Coffey acknowledges that in some cases, especially with unique funding opportunities like "The Value of Water" at St. John the Divine, formal evaluation is not really a concern. "There are ways of marking it and seeing it," she says.

Of course, the foundation's grantee partners are asked to report back on their work and its challenges. The foundation asks, "How do you see your work furthering Lambent's maxim of 'Art.Culture.Justice'?" Building on this, one of Coffey's goals for the coming year—a sort of internal evaluation protocol—is to surface these responses and have a dialogue among partners about what it means to be doing this work. Theirs is a highly intentional, but not rigidly structured, evaluation. "We don't have the boxes," Coffey says. "[Boxes] don't lead us

into the newer direction and the harder questions and it doesn't tell us a lot about ourselves and our practice."



The Opportunity Agenda's Creative Change retreat, 2011

Naturally, there are times when evaluation is formal and thorough as well as intentional. For example, Lambent had been funding The Opportunity Agenda's five-day Creative Change retreat for artists and organizers since its launch in 2009. After five years of investment, both staff and donor had questions. What relationships and collaborations grew out of the retreat? How did the retreat affect the artists' and organizers' work? Did the retreat succeed in building new bridges

between social justice, art, and media? How did the experience of the retreat motivate action in its participants and others?

Michelle Coffey has thought deeply about the role of evaluation in illuminating specific projects as well as tackling the foundation's bigger questions about art, justice, and philanthropic practice. "I think the standard measurements of evaluation miss the opportunities and dynamics of what this field brings forward between art, aesthetics, and social justice. So, we need something newer and different. Funders can't be leading it. Practitioners need to push back and have their needs reflected in the evaluation and it can't be a one-size-fits-all."

The Creative Change evaluation project illustrates what Coffey means by "newer and different." It has the buy-in and participation of many of the retreat's funders. And since, as Coffey insists, it's not appropriate for funders to take the lead, practitioners have also raised questions. Inputs will include stakeholder interviews, alumni surveys, and observations of several retreats and a strategy meeting. The final product, a collaboration of funders, retreat planners, and participants, pulled together by several evaluators⁶ with different approaches, is envisioned as more robust and detailed than is frequently the case.

The final report, which will figure heavily in The Opportunity Agenda's internal learning process, will be delivered to funders in fall 2013. A longer, more evocative monograph incorporating evaluation findings, along with musings by the facilitators, profiles of participants and essays

about projects that emerged from the retreats, will be published in print and online at the same time. But since the Creative Change retreats did not begin with a fully articulated set of goals and theory of change, this final compilation will be less about analysis and more about the spirit of ongoing learning and engagement embodied in the retreats themselves.

While evaluation is important, analysis and publications are not a core goal for Lambent. Coffey feeds on the smaller, intimate conversations among her colleagues in the art/activism funding community—she’s a core member of the Art, Culture, and Social Justice Network⁷—but doesn’t necessarily need this dialogue to be collected and codified. “I am wary of ... putting it down on paper, only because the field is so turbulent and the landscape is shifting amongst all of us. And so this idea of a structure of an evaluation and focusing on that—I think I might miss what is happening right now and how we structure an evaluation may not be applicable three or five years from now.”

This is the voice of experience. Lambent started its formal grantmaking in 2009 just as the fiscal crisis hit. They had, she says, great intentions for supporting networking and shared learning, but “it all had to be tossed out the window just to stop the hemorrhaging at these critical alternative art spaces.” When the worst was over, the core questions had changed. “How do we adjust? Does it happen through mergers? Acquisitions? How do we help an organization that recognizes it has reached the end of its lifespan close gracefully? All of these bigger questions ... seem so much more relevant to our practices than standard evaluation.”

But as Michelle Coffey maps Lambent’s future course, a different kind of evaluation comes into focus. While formal evaluation—the kind that ties everything up in a neat package—is not on the agenda, assessment, learning, and greater focus are. “We’re going to focus. ... We’re going to really think about who is in deep alignment with Lambent’s intention and ... focus on those grantee partners ... deepening the relationships that we have with them and ... going deeper into the needs ... and the growth of the organizations, then connecting them. Being more intentional about connecting and networking and having this dialogue flow between New York, New Orleans, and Nairobi ... so we really begin to understand landscape and intention and what’s really going on.” This is what 2013 and beyond will look like: fewer grantee partners that are intentionally nurtured through deeper partnerships with one goal—to see more of the flickering brilliance, the lambent light of the best artists’ radiant work.



Ann McQueen, principal at [McQueen Philanthropic](#), an advisory service for foundations and individuals, has nearly 20 years experience in philanthropy. Formerly, McQueen served on the board of Grantmakers in the Arts and led the Boston Foundation’s arts grantmaking, developed a fellowship program to celebrate individual artists, and led a series of seminal research projects into the fiscal health of the cultural sector. She is a member of the boards of Boston Natural Areas Network, which preserves and advocates for urban open space, and Associated Grant Makers, a forum for New England foundations and their nonprofit partners.

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End Notes

¹ Under the IRS Code, private foundations and donor advised funds can support an individual through a scholarship, fellowship or grant for a particular purpose. The grantmaking process requires advance approval from the IRS to assure that the manner in which awards are made is objective and nondiscriminatory and that the donor of a donor advised fund is not directly involved in the selection process. In addition, once made, the grants are subject to special monitoring and reporting.

² Michelle Coffey, Executive Director, Lambent Foundation, spoke with the author on January 3, 2013; all quotes and observations are pulled from that interview.

³ A donor advised fund (DAF) is a charitable giving vehicle held and administered by a public charity, often a community foundation, on behalf of the donor (an organization, family or individual). A DAF is a low cost, flexible and easily established alternative to a private foundation.

⁴ International grantmaking has always had unique compliance and legal requirements; additional new regulations were enacted after September 11, 2001. In particular, see Executive Order 13224 (2001), the U.S. Patriot Act (2001), and the Treasury Department Anti-Terrorist Financing Guidelines: Voluntary Best Practices for U.S. Based Charities (2002).

⁵ The term "due diligence" refers to the review process that is conducted to ensure that the potential grantee has the capacity and commitment to implement the proposed project as described.

⁶ Betsy Richards, Creative Fellow at The Opportunity Agenda, is directing the Creative Change evaluation effort; the effort was launched by Jason Drucker, former Director of Development and Operations and Richards. Diane Espaldon is developing the theory of social change and taking the lead on stakeholder interviews; Rinku Sen and staff at Applied Research Center are developing case studies about individuals and projects connected to the retreat.

⁷ The Arts, Culture, & Social Justice Network (formerly known as the Arts and Social Justice Working Group), is a network of people and organizations engaged in learning and action to create a more equitable and creative world. It works to build knowledge, increase resources, and advance advocacy and activism for arts/culture and social justice.