

Penelope Boyer

Excerpted from *NAAO @ Fales | How it happened*

Commissioned by Common Field for their Histories Project and published online at

<https://www.commonfield.org/projects/2280/naao-files-fales-how-it-happened-by-penelope-boyer>

...In 1990, [Art Matters](#) had given fellowships to artists' space pioneer [Joy Silverman](#) and Art Matters/Visual AIDS acolyte [Alexander Gray](#) to conceive the [National Campaign for Freedom of Expression \(NCFE\)](#) to alleviate the burden of advocacy and activism absorbing NAAO's identity as an arts service organization. David Mendoza was appointed the first executive director of [the](#) Campaign; his tenure ran from 1991-1997. In 2000, NCFE ceased operations after transferring programs and assets to a number of organizations, including NAAO.

I was excited to learn where NCFE's materials were and genuinely wondered where NAAO's materials landed.

In early 1989, I was an NEA Arts Administration fellow-in-residence (an opportunity that evidently no longer exists) assigned to the Inter-Arts Program (a now long-defunct division at the Endowment that addressed interdisciplinary work). I worked with Senior Program Specialist Loris Bradley, who designed and conducted, with significant figures from the

field, the first funding cycle of Artists Projects: New Forms—an initiative aimed at funding experimental, artist-driven, frequently multidisciplinary projects. These projects were mostly incubated at artist-run organizations, i.e. NAAO member organizations.

My NEA residency extended beyond my fellowship: I stayed on staff as an Inter-Arts temporary program specialist through the New Forms funding cycle, after the [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) photographs and [Andre Serrano's \*Piss Christ\*](#) images had been exploited on the floor of Congress that winter. Just as the Congressional controversy was cooking, "[multiculturalism](#)" was seeping into the vocabulary of the Endowment. Next to the Inter-Arts Program on the 6th floor of the [Nancy Hanks Building, the old Post Office Building](#) in DC (now the Trump International Hotel), sat the Endowment's Expansion Arts Program dedicated in large part to the nurturing of ethnic-specific arts and arts organizations. Specifically identifying and nurturing individual artists of color was a new, almost novel, tactic. Toward that end, I was tasked to review résumés received as part of the New Forms applications and identify artists of color operating in these “new” realms of artistic expression. It was a hefty stack.

I found myself smuggling material from the Endowment into the hands of Charlotte R. Murphy, NAAO's executive director and sole staff member at the time. Once New Forms funding decisions had been made, grantees notified, and hundreds of work samples returned from that first funding cycle, my job at the Endowment ended; I went to work at NAAO, first as assistant director and eventually as associate director.

NAAO's might, I contend, was during these years (1989-1993) while I was there with Charlotte Murphy. Charlotte was remarkable. Her activist instincts were acute, astute, and accurate. Born in Afghanistan to an intelligent Irish-American State Department official and a beautiful woman from India, she graduated from [St. John's College](#) in Annapolis—the school whose distinctive curriculum centers on consumption of the classics, the Great Books Reading List. Charlotte always looked smart, sharp, and chic. She understood NAAO's membership completely, supporting leaders in the field, cultivating envied relationships with members of the press, carefully criticizing culture war deniers, and communicating closely with Congress. Our topics were tough; she made messages simple, straightforward, steel-clad, and steady. I was in awe of her.

For the next few furious years, with Charlotte at the helm and I at her side, we placed the artists' voice on the front page of *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Time Magazine*, in front of Congress, in the face of other arts service organizations who resisted the culture wars, the larger institutional arts groups who at first denied the censorship implicit in Congress's mandated "decency clause" and its threat to Constitutionally-endowed freedom of expression that comes from tampering with [governmental peer review committee decisions](#).

NAAO grew to include Victoria Reis who went from intern to staff, and former Development Director Imani (Mary) Drayton-Hill.

NAAO convened national conferences and published [membership directories](#), [commissioned position papers](#), and [circulated news bulletins and advocacy flashes](#). Production of the notoriously proofread-free NAAO bulletin and flashes was collaborative: Charlotte and I would decide on the content, which was as up-to-the-minute and as timely as possible; the bulletins and flashes were always strategically timed and mailed within 48 hours of production, usually on tabloid-sized newsprint. We tried to provide firsthand source material in the NAAO bulletin; we didn't digest. We also provided instructions on how to

conduct grassroots arts advocacy. What's now second-nature to arts organizations of all ilk (Congressional letter-writing and call-ins, collaboration with the non-art sectors of society, maintaining timelines as evidential arsenal) was provided as primers in NAAO publications.

Following Charlotte's maternity leave, [Helen Brunner](#) served as NAAO's interim executive director from 1993-1996. After Helen, [Roberto Bedoya](#) was appointed executive director in 1996 and served until 2001. After Roberto's tenure, NAAO tried to reinvent itself: (<http://www.artscope.net/NEWS/new08132002-2.shtml>)

*"In a move designed to enhance its connections with member organizations, The National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAAO) has relocated their offices from Washington, DC to the facilities of member organization Space One Eleven, a non-profit, artists-directed visual arts center which serves the community of Birmingham Alabama and also has a national presence...*

*... NAAO Board member Ed Taylor writes in NAAO E\*NEWS, "...We are looking eagerly at a reinvigorated and vibrant future, and a new era in NAAO's history. The 20th anniversary promises to be memorable and we welcome members and supporters past, present, and future to join us in reestablishing NAAO as a key resource for the field and a leading voice in America's cultural conversation!"*

*... With the departure of Executive Director Roberto Bedoya in 2001, NAAO has been operated by a national volunteer board. To meet the challenges of managing an organization with until recently no staff and with few resources, board members — including Diane Barber; Julia Kirt, F. John Herbert; Ed Taylor and Rolando Arroyo-*

*Sucre — have met five times in the past two years and have worked diligently as individuals and on committees to ensure NAAO's stability and to chart its future..."*

NAAO never regained the momentum needed to really reestablish itself as an arts service organization.

And [David Mendoza](#) never replied to the question I posed on Tim [Miller]'s Facebook post:

*Do you know where NAAO files went?*

So, the next time Roberto Bedoya came to town, which he did sometimes, I'd ask if he knew where the NAAO files were.

Well, according to Roberto, he had gotten the NAAO archives in good order and placed them with other NAAO ephemera in a DC- vicinity storage unit at the end of his NAAO tenure. NAAO fractured and was then reborn in Birmingham, Alabama. Evidently, in the interim, the storage unit rental payments were let lapse. The NAAO archives were gone.

At about this time too, [Victoria Reiss](#), now cofounder of a successful DC artists' space, urged me to attend the [2016 Common Field Convening in Miami](#). There I saw a field flourishing after the

disappearance of NAAO's once excellent and exuberant efforts. I connected with [Martha Wilson](#), who has been helping demystify NAAO and the history of the artist space movement for Common Field. When Martha arrived in San Antonio for a Fall 2017 Artpace residency, I presented her with a complete set of NAAO bulletins and flashes from my tenure. She told me the papers of [Mary Dorman](#), attorney for the NEA 4, had gone to NYU's Fales Library and that that would be a good place for NAAO's material to go as well. Of course, Marvin Taylor, the man who responded to Tim Miller on Facebook, is director at Fales. I quickly learned Fales kept the [Downtown Collection](#):

*The Downtown Collection, ...founded in 1994, documents the downtown arts scene that evolved in SoHo and the Lower East Side during the 1970s and through the early 1990s.*

*The Downtown Collection includes the personal papers of artists, filmmakers, writers and performers; archives of art galleries, theater groups and art collectives; and collections relating to AIDS activism, music, and off-off Broadway theater. The Collection also includes a significant amount of printed, published materials either by or related to people associated with the scene and the events of the period, and its effect on wider social and cultural movements.*

Ideal, I thought.

Plus, I am an NYU alumnus, having received my Master's degree in [Performance Studies](#) in 1988.

Marvin marveled at the NAAO bulletins, Martha said. In early 2018, Martha put me in touch with Marvin, then Marvin put me in touch with [Nicholas Martin](#), librarian for archival collections and reference services at Fales. I met up with Nicholas in New York and babbled at him about my NAAO-era floppy discs, files, culture war-era t-shirts, [Arts Coalition for the March on Washington \(ACMOW\)](#) material, [ArtsWire](#) binders, the box of “multicultural” résumés from the NEA in the late ’80s. All these materials had been in my attic under the South Texas sun for a quarter-century with all kind of critters lurking—pecan pieces, varmint feces. I worried the floppies had fried.

I asked if the archives might also be interested in the work I did as an itinerant downtown ensemble performer in the ’80s and ’90s. My status as an active performer had allowed NAAO self-identify as an artist-run organization. Nicholas said, “Sure, we like to know the full lives of our donors and especially since your work was here, downtown.”

I got anxious my material would now be available only by appointment in New York. Within days I built [www.naaarchives.org](http://www.naaarchives.org),

composed of the scanned content of 25 NAAO bulletins and flashes, all the NAAO directories, and a series of contextual articles.

Tim tells me his stuff will go to Fales, too.

Sending these attic boxes somewhere they might interest someone someday gives me a healing feeling.

Now if only the critters would leave whatever's left up there alone.

Like my boxes of material regarding *Esperanza Peace and Justice Ctr. V. City of San Antonio*, a local lawsuit that went to federal court and was won by the Esperanza Center resulting in a half-million-dollar award and cementing a precedent articulated by the Supreme Court in that infamous 1998 *National Endowment for the Arts v. Karen Finley, et al* ruling. It's up to local governments to decide whether they want to use public monies for cultural purposes, but, federal judge Orlando L. Garcia wrote in 2001, "Once a governing body chooses to fund art, however, the Constitution requires that it be funded in a viewpoint-neutral manner, that is, without discriminating among recipients on

the basis of their ideology.” The opinion’s language echoed the Finley ruling, in which the Supreme Court said the government is free to set content-based grant-making criteria, but that it must apply those guidelines equally among applicants. A small artist-driven arts residency program I ran with visual artist Michael Marínez called VāN was defunded, along with our fiscal agent the Esperanza, with the San Antonio Gay and Lesbian Media Project, also both fiscal agented by the Esperanza. So [we served as co-plaintiffs](#) on this case just as NAAO had on the NEA 4 lawsuit.

This was the first national arts litigation following the NEA 4 Supreme Court ruling: an entirely other fight played out on an entirely different field. The culture wars of the ‘90s did not end with the NEA 4; they remained rooted in the artist space movement and became even more deeply entwined with that which is called multicultural.

And I thought I’d left these battles behind me in DC.