

THE ALDRICH CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

Narrative

1. Statement of Need

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum seeks IMLS support for a comprehensive audience and community survey and evaluation process, the *Community Research Initiative*. The project will lay the groundwork for our next Strategic Plan and inform the future direction of the institution, both strategically and programmatically, as we simultaneously build institutional capacity to learn from, and better serve, our audience. IMLS funding will enable us to retain People, Places & Design Research, a respected consultant serving the Museum field, who will work with us over a sixteen-month period to craft and administer a set of survey instruments, and then evaluate the results. A unique twist will be added to the investigation by including visual artists—one of our core constituencies—to participate as observers and surveyors. Following their participation, these selected artists will be invited to offer a creative response to the fact-finding, and will work with the Museum’s curatorial staff to develop related future exhibitions/projects.

Founded in 1964 in Ridgefield, CT, by lifelong collector Larry Aldrich, The Aldrich has evolved into a highly-regarded contemporary art museum that presents a rotating schedule of exhibitions that regularly receive critical acclaim. In 1981, with the founder’s blessing, the Museum’s collection was de-accessioned and an operating endowment established. Freed from the demands of collections management, the staff and board created a new mission to focus exclusively on making innovative exhibitions, working with practicing artists to commission new work, and offering vital education programs for audiences of all ages. Many of the Museum’s peer institutions are located in Europe, while in the United States comparable unaffiliated, non-collecting museums include Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver. The Aldrich is recognized internationally for its thematic group exhibitions, always based on clear, straightforward ideas with the potential for bringing together diverse works of art and placing them in a context that facilitates their understanding. While maintaining the registrarial and art-handling standards of a national institution, the Museum has retained its ability to maintain the focus and commitment to the issues of the day that are central to its goals. Thirty thousand people visit annually.

The Aldrich’s last Strategic Plan (2003-08), initiated shortly after the founder’s death, represented an ambitious step forward. The plan outlined the path for the construction of a new, state-of-the-art facility that more than doubled available exhibition space. It called for a concomitant \$7M capital campaign, but the goal was successfully raised to \$9M in order to increase the scope and quality of the building and enhance our endowment. (The new Hall Curatorial Fellowship, which brings an overseas curator to The Aldrich to create an exhibition, is a tangible result of that increase.) We were able to achieve a \$500,000 Kresge challenge grant, which acknowledged our successful efforts to broaden our base of support, including the mobilization of a newly-expanded Board, new Fairfield County benefactors, and unprecedented backing from Ridgefield’s local civic community. In June 2004, during the second year of the plan, the new building opened, on time and on budget. Later that year, the Museum was awarded its second IMLS grant, and introduced the *Family Learning Initiative*, which enabled us to utilize the new facility to respond to audience requests for expanded opportunities for parents to experience the Museum with their children, thereby strengthening a core aspect of our mission. The Strategic Plan also recommended a maiden American Association of Museums accreditation—currently underway—along with the introduction of an array of improved policies and procedures. In the spring of 2005, senior staff and members of the Board of Trustees also engaged in an interim “Strategic Thinking” process, taking part in roundtables with key constituent groups, informal ambush surveys in our galleries, and consultations with peers and colleagues. These capacity-building measures, along with the new facility and related program development, together underscore the evolution of The Aldrich into a

continuously improving, learning organization. The transformation—from a collector-driven, and to some appearances private museum, to an accessible, admired institution that serves a broad public—has been accomplished.

Since 2004, we have adjusted to the new facility while incorporating elements of our Strategic Plan so as to welcome and educate our members and visitors. We have also focused on reaching out to, and enhancing our reputation within, the New York, national, and international art world. The new building was introduced by an exhibition of new British sculpture and a specially-created Sol LeWitt project; the *Contemporary Erotic Drawing* exhibition in 2005 drew widespread attention and traveled to Houston; and an Austrian curator was the inaugural recipient of the Hall Curatorial Fellowship.

Yet with the passage of time, and with its expanded platform, the Museum has determined that one key goal of the 2003-2008 plan has proved elusive. A core vision of that plan was “*To make the Aldrich a destination event; attract, fulfill, retain, and grow new and culturally diverse CT, NY and national audiences; and reach increasingly broader and deeper relationships with our membership and the public.*” After an initial spike in attendance in the year after our reopening, and after 2006—when we presented a blockbuster exhibition (the only US opportunity to see *Anselm Kiefer: Velimir Chlebnikov*)—the growth rate of attendance of discretionary visitors has leveled off. While we have been especially successful in attracting the national and international art aficionado, we still encounter individuals who, despite living within a short drive of the Museum, have yet to make their way here. While we regularly solicit feedback from visitors and administer formal exit surveys for larger group exhibitions, our staff size is modest and our ability to do the necessary community-based leg-work to talk to infrequent and non-visitors has been limited. Thus, it is not altogether surprising that the more recent discretionary audience growth has not met our expectations.

Our intended audience for the *Community Research Initiative* is not one single target group, but rather the range of contrasting communities that make up the Museum’s local constituency. As a suburban Museum, located in Ridgefield, Connecticut, The Aldrich’s geographic community extends north through Danbury to Litchfield County, west to New York State and New Jersey, east to Fairfield, and south to Westport, Norwalk, New Canaan, Stamford, and Greenwich. Over one million people reside within a 20-mile radius of the Museum in Westchester County, NY, and Fairfield County, CT. Our immediate Ridgefield community is small—only 25,000 people—and very homogeneous, less than five percent non-Caucasian, and less than three percent low- and middle-income. In contrast, the dynamic, fast-expanding, and multi-ethnic community in Danbury, less than ten miles away, boasts the largest number of foreign-born residents in the State of Connecticut. Bridgeport, Norwalk and Stamford, a short drive away, are urban centers with large low-income and minority populations, with hubs experiencing or hoping for economic revitalization. Along with these more diverse and dynamic communities, our intended audience also includes the surprisingly large number of companies, and by extension, their employees, who work in Ridgefield and adjacent towns. The Board and staff have identified all these target groups as vital constituents of the Museum, and while we have already made important inroads through partnerships with public schools and arts organizations in these communities, we recognize that much more can be done.

In forming hypotheses about what motivates our surrounding communities, and in trying to understand whether structural barriers exist that prevent audiences from coming to and inside our door, the director and Board have even begun to ask whether a satellite location in an urban center, a site closer to mass transit, or some other substantial, offsite strategic initiative should be considered to complement our current low-density suburban site. Such a dramatic new direction would have profound consequences for all aspects of our work, giving rise to possible new models of programming for our existing facility (a laboratory for program development is one idea that has been posited, for example). A Board committee has formed to identify and explore goals and

parameters for discussing possible initiatives, and the topic is slated to be at the center of the discussions of the next Strategic Plan (2009-2014). Any such initiative would be within the Museum's current mission and mandate to focus on contemporary art and education.

It is against this backdrop that we seek to better understand our surrounding communities and to stimulate conversations with visitors and non-visitors alike. With IMLS support, the *Community Research Initiative* will enable the Museum to better serve audiences by gathering information from our surrounding communities on the attitudes, perceptions, motivations, competing priorities, and beliefs about the Museum, and testing our assumptions about these communities and clarifying our understanding of their needs and interests.

The staff and Trustees of the Museum know that they are blessed in that our founder, Larry Aldrich, created an institution to stand the tests of time. The basis of superior exhibitions and forward-thinking education programs introduced during his lifetime is backed up by the legacy of a strong endowment. An award-winning facility has helped the Museum earn a reputation as one of the finest museums in Connecticut. A sound management team, led by director Harry Philbrick, the 2007 recipient of Connecticut's Elizabeth Mahaffey Arts Administration Fellowship, has been reinforced by the arrival of deputy director Helen Kauder, an arts administrator with private sector experience. Consequently, we believe that the time has come to make the most of the Museum's heritage and environs—in Ridgefield itself and the neighboring towns of Fairfield County—to delve deeply into the public's perception of the institution, in order to expand The Aldrich's scope of influence.

2. Project Design

The project is scheduled to take place over the course of sixteen months, commencing September 1, 2008. IMLS funding for the *Community Research Initiative* will be used to:

- Retain People, Places & Design Research (PPDR) to create and tailor a strategy for the project with a focus on Ridgefield, contiguous towns (Westport, Weston, Brookfield, Bethel and Greenwich) and cities (Danbury, Stamford and Bridgeport) within an easy drive of the Museum. The Museum is located five miles from the New York State border, and the review will include Katonah (the closest train stop), Lewisboro and Bedford. PPDR will begin by meeting the five departments led by senior staff (curatorial, education, marketing/PR, finance, and Museum operations) to understand their goals, challenges and to begin to collect input for questions. PPDR will then design a series of intercept surveys and focus groups, train staff, hire interviewers and facilitators, and ensure that the survey process unfolds professionally and yields accurate data.
- Defray the costs of three mid-survey site visits (fall, spring and summer) to tweak questions, methodology, offer mid-course corrections if needed, and produce interim assessments.
- Cover the firm's fees to process and evaluate the resultant data (comparing it to data gathered in-house where possible) once the interviewing reaches the sampling goals, and produce a final report to be presented to the Museum.
- Mobilize survey participants via ad campaigns online, on air, by phone, and in local publications, and by reaching them in area libraries, supermarkets, train stations, and other places where people congregate. PPDR will also help us issue email surveys to our existing e-list of 6,000+ people.
- Remunerate approximately eight surveyors to go out into the community to conduct the surveys, facilitating their transportation and travel in some cases.
- Provide a fee or honorarium to nine artists who will be invited to attend the focus groups and bring their own creative perspective to the evaluation. They will offer a creative response to the process by formulating new works or artistic projects that reflect and address the issues raised. This IMLS grant will not cover any actual exhibition of the projects, but would defray the fees associated with the creation of the conceptual proposals.

The curatorial staff will work with the artists to develop related future projects and the Museum will identify funding at a later date to cover the research-inspired exhibition costs.

The Goals of the *Community Research Initiative* are:

- To put our ear to the ground to learn what people think of The Aldrich, both in Ridgefield and the rest of Fairfield County, and learn how the Museum can best serve the community:
 - What do people think of the Museum, both its programming and its site?
 - What would encourage them to visit?
 - What would encourage them to keep on returning?
 - What don't they like or what deters them for visiting?
 - Does our suburban location present a barrier to visitors from out of town?
- To obtain information that will help to develop programming for both exhibitions and education
- To position the Museum to move forward as a locally, as well as nationally and internationally respected institution
- To gain insight into the feasibility of the Museum developing a satellite location
- To collect, analyze and distill information that will be valuable and useful for the Museum's upcoming strategic planning process
- To use community-based insights to inform our upcoming work to develop the Museum's next Strategic Plan

In order to reach and talk to people who have never before been approached about the Museum, we will call for participants through vigorous outreach. The Museum will advertise on local public radio, and in town papers and through area businesses. Our intercept interviews, focus groups and activities will be scheduled during times when sampling goals can be more easily attained (vs. times when people are away, or cocooning due to inclement weather, or in class).

The Museum will leverage its large network of artists, curators, and artist-centered organizations to identify and select a diverse group of nine community-oriented artists to integrate into the process, so that they can add their unique feedback to the evaluation. Artists want to know what people think; they often see solutions that others don't see, and have an interesting angle on what people say. Their assignment will be to attend the *Community Research Initiative* and then work with the Museum's curatorial staff to develop an artistic response. This will take the form of an exhibition and related programming, either in the Museum or in the community, using the evaluation (process *and* results) as muse, after the grant period has concluded. In this way, the Museum will create a public way to acknowledge the ideas and the contributions of survey participants.

As noted, one of the points to be investigated in the evaluation is the possibility of a satellite location for the Museum. Use possibilities include space for new educational facilities or new curatorial programs, and an art storage facility that would service collectors and generate income. The Museum is fortunate to have the capacity and resources to take advantage of real estate opportunities, and is interested to know if it might be able to affect more people with a location in an urban area. A second location would build on the Museum's strong reputation and take advantage of the resources available as a result of the renaissance occurring in Connecticut's coastal urban communities.

The Aldrich has a strong track record of responding to evaluation results and to offering our audiences improvements and changes which not only reflect their input, but are also sustained over time. Some recent examples:

- During the creation of the last Strategic Plan, we sought the input of constituent artists to guide our facility design and spending priorities. Through the suggestions made by artists, we learned, for example, that we needed to create some gallery space that would not have a cement floor. Artists also reported a lack of galleries that offered smaller, more intimate spaces (artists were reacting to a slate of new modern and contemporary museums that unveiled very large galleries); and also appealed to us to retain a flexible work and contractual arrangement that would make it possible to develop new work collaboratively. Our responsiveness continues to pay dividends in the positive experiences reported by exhibiting artists.
- In 2004 the Museum launched its *Family Learning Initiative* after ascertaining that families in the area were looking for opportunities to learn together and share experiences in a welcoming and enriching environment. After garnering IMLS support, attendance at the already popular Family program grew tenfold. After the funding period of the IMLS grant came to an end, the Museum wanted to sustain its commitment to the *Initiative* and sought out and was awarded replacement funds from our local community foundation.
- Students in the program for high school juniors and seniors, *Art Lab*, requested the addition of a community service/social action element to the program. In fall 2007 *Art Lab* commenced a year-long collaboration with two diverse inner-city community groups for teens, geared to social activism in the arts.

3. Project Resources: Time, Personnel, Budget

In summer 2008, just prior to the grant period, Aldrich staff will already be conducting audience surveys in the galleries in connection with the Museum's self-evaluation for the American Association of Museums (AAM) accreditation. Thus, the *Community Research Initiative* will take off from, and build directly on, baseline information from existing members and users, so that in-Museum intercept surveys, gathered during our high season, can be compared against non-visitor (and subsequent summer visitor) results. This will also allow us to fully test our assumption that there is a seasonal variation in who visits.

The grant period will commence in fall 2008, when PPDR will meet with Museum staff to develop survey tools and scripts to train interviewers. Data gathering will take place in three concerted sessions over the next twelve months—fall, spring, and summer. We will begin by tapping our network of artists to select nine artists interested in being part of community-based research. We will recruit eight surveyors (four full-time equivalents) who will go into the immediate community to conduct focus groups, “intercept” interviews, and fan out to neighboring towns and urban areas, accompanied by artist-observers. A college intern will assist during the busiest summer season. We will record in-depth interviews and use a transcription service to create a reference of reactions and comments. After data tabulation, review and analysis, PPDR will take six to eight weeks to report back to The Aldrich, presenting findings at the end of 2009. The insights and data gained from every aspect of the evaluation process will then lay the basis for the Museum's next Strategic Plan.

In its preparation for AAM accreditation, the Aldrich has allocated funds to create the new position of deputy director. The coordination of our evaluation, self-study, and planning is one of the responsibilities of this deputy director, Helen Kauder. She will also serve as chief coordinator of the *Community Research Initiative*, husbanding the project's resources, mobilizing manpower to ensure that the scope of the data gathering covers the diverse target audiences. Kauder has over twenty years of project management experience in non-profit as well as corporate settings. The director of education, Nina Carlson, will also participate. It was her initial research that helped identify PPRD as the firm most suited to our current needs. We interviewed four consultants, but chose PPRD for their willingness to structure the project in seasonal phases, for their interest in allowing artists a place in the process, for evidence of their skills in designing survey instruments in multiple environments, and for their willingness to commit their principal, Jeff Hayward, to work directly on the project. Hayward has been involved in prior projects under IMLS funding: for example a needs assessment for Association of African American Museums, and the Bell Museum of Natural History's research, which has

involved a metropolitan study and more than 500 interviews. Of note, he has worked with institutions that share an off-the-beaten-path location comparable to that of The Aldrich, such as MassMoca and the Peabody Essex Museum.

Through Trustee Bill Burback (a former director of education at MoMA), the Museum has developed a close association with the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in New York City. Working through the School's list-serve, The Aldrich will recruit and retain a team of surveyors who are currently pursuing or have received degrees at Bank Street. This will provide the *Initiative* with a pool of available interviewers, help keep overall costs down, and provide valuable fieldwork experience to future arts administrators. The Museum has already begun the process of seeking and allocating funds for the 1:1 match. The Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism's Operating Support grant program, along with the annual gift from the Goldstone Family Foundation, will cover the staff's contributed time to this *Community Research Initiative*. Although these grantors must be applied to on an annual basis and are not yet confirmed, the Museum has received support consistently from both sources in every year for the past several years, in the order of \$60,000 combined. We are therefore highly confident that support will be continued. In addition to contributing staff, the Museum will also absorb the cost of offering one-year memberships to individuals who participate in the surveys and focus groups, and devote part of its existing marketing budget to ensure adequate project outreach. Finally, a proposal to MetLife's Museum Community and Connections program (submitted October 2007) would enable the Museum to involve more intensively the growing community of new arrivals from Central and Latin America who live in Danbury in our effort. This pending grant, which would make it possible to supplement our work and offer Spanish and Portuguese surveys, does not appear as revenue in the attached budget.

4. Impact

The *Community Research Initiative* will build institutional capacity by enabling us:

- To develop the reputation of the Museum as a place that values what its community thinks and says. (Measure: Number of project participants, eventual attendance figures at project-inspired exhibitions).
- To have a better understanding of the needs and interests of current and prospective audiences in order to maximize our educational potential in programming, interpretation, and outreach. (Measure: new programs, evaluation, and attendance tracking)
- To strengthen ties to our community by involving it in the process and by enabling the staff to understand what our audiences think of us. (Measure: Community component to Strategic Plan)
- To see our audience and membership grow. We hope to show twenty percent per year growth, up from our current 750 members. (Measure: front desk tracking, activation of new memberships from roster of *CRI* participants)
- To increase virtual visitors to the Aldrich Web site and subscribers to Aldrich eNews. (Measure: Web hits)
- To diversify our geographical audience as against the baseline areas, creating a presence where we have to date only been able to forge a relationship with school-age visitors. (Measure: tracking zip codes)
- To lay the groundwork for the next strategic plan. (Measure: Strategic Plan)
- To formalize plans and test assumptions for the future of the Museum. (Measure: survey results)
- To leverage PPDR's analytic expertise for staff and Board to understand the implications of our findings. (PPDR written report)
- To identify possible training and professional development needs of staff as a result of the conclusions in the written report and to maximize the investment of staff, Board, and artists in the long-term plan and future of the Museum. (Measure: Strategic Plan, staff and Board retention)

- To establish additional community advisory committees and recruit new members and perspectives to supplement our Teachers' Advisory Committee and Education Committee. (Measure: attendance, size, breadth of group, frequency of meeting, documented agenda and activities)
- To obtain nine exciting new exhibition proposals with great relevance to our community as a result of the artists' participation. (Impact will be after IMLS support ends; the Museum will seek funding to realize the proposals)

We anticipate benefit to the field as well. The Aldrich believes that the model that will be created as a result of the *Community Research Initiative* will be applicable to other suburban organizations, and we will share our process and results with them. For example, the Museum is one of the fourteen members of the Connecticut Arts Trail, where we jointly develop marketing plans and share insights from local initiatives; the results of this evaluation will be useful to organizations right in our home state. Our *Student Docent Program* kit has to date enabled over 65 other museums to launch their own programs, based upon The Aldrich's fifteen years developing and enhancing the acclaimed program.

The impact of the *Community Research Initiative* will resound in The Aldrich's planning and artistic and educational presentations long after the funding period, as the data obtained will form the basis for the next Strategic Plan. The activities outlined herein will enable the Museum to build a strong, inclusive future for all our constituents, increasing our ability to serve artists and public alike, while ensuring a broader base of support for the institution.

BUDGET FORM - PAGE FOUR

Section B: Summary Budget

	\$ IMLS	\$ Cost Share	\$ TOTAL COSTS
1. Salaries and Wages		21,500.00	21,500.00
2. Fringe Benefits		5,375.00	5,375.00
3. Consultant Fees	76,365.00	3,000.00	79,365.00
4. Travel	1,500.00	4,710.00	6,210.00
5. Supplies and Materials		2,900.00	2,900.00
6. Services		14,000.00	14,000.00
7. Student Support			0.00
8. Other Costs	2,000.00	17,450.00	19,450.00
TOTAL DIRECT COSTS (1–8)	79,865.00	68,935.00	148,800.00
9. Indirect Costs		11,980.00	11,980.00
TOTAL COSTS (Direct and Indirect)	79,865.00	80,915.00	160,780.00

Project Funding for the Entire Grant Period

1. Grant Funds Requested from IMLS	79,865.00
2. Cost Sharing:	
a. Cash Contribution	80,915.00
b. In-Kind Contribution	
c. Other Federal Agencies*	
d. TOTAL COST SHARING	80,915.00
3. TOTAL PROJECT FUNDING (1+2d)	160,780.00
% of Total Costs Requested from IMLS	49.67%

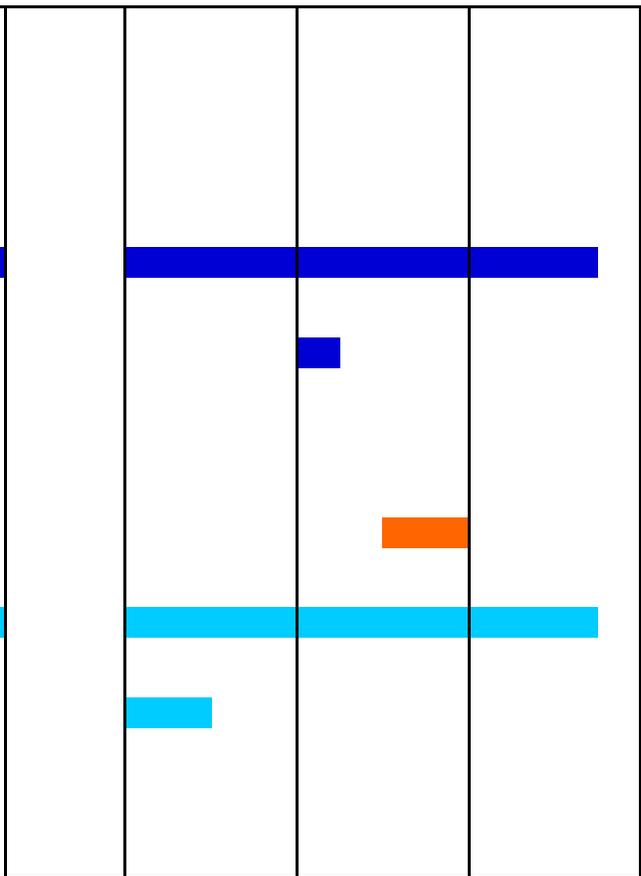
* If funding has been requested from another federal agency, indicate the agency's name:

Dec '08-Mar '09

Apr '09

May '09

Jun '09



Nov '09

Dec '09

Nov '09	Dec '09
[Grey bar]	[Grey bar]