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COMMENTARY

In Minneapolis, Artists Are Essential Workers in a Time of Trauma

Art and community are helping the city grieve, rage and heal in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder.

By [Nichole M. Christian](#) | May 25, 2021, at 8:59 a.m.

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A cyclist rides past the free public art exhibit "Justice for George: Messages from the People" at Phelps Field Park near George Floyd Memorial Square in Minneapolis on May 22. In the months after Floyd's murder by a police officer, the city used funding from The Kresge Foundation to award grants for art projects that strived to promote community engagement and healing. (KEREM YUCEL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES)

Sayge Carroll and Keegan Xavi are [Minneapolis](#)-based artists who've spent the last year engaging in grassroots art activism as an antidote to the heaviness of living in a city now globally synonymous with police brutality, violent protests and racial reckoning.

In the months following George Floyd's murder, Carroll and Xavi, each interdisciplinary artists, hosted Harvest Feast meals – one on the city's south side and the other in Xavi's backyard on the north side. They also distributed "Tiny Art Kits" as a form of expression. Their intent: to create safe methods and spaces to exchange hard emotions like grief, rage and reimagined hopes in the aftermath of watching Floyd's murder and their city being torn apart in the days and weeks that followed. The Harvest Feast events were also the duo's response to a request from the Minneapolis Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy for artists of color to help extinguish some of the city's grief through direct acts of neighborhood engagement.

In exchange, the city awarded grants of \$10,000 for 10 neighborhood-based projects spread across Minneapolis, including at the infamous intersection of 38th Street and Chicago Avenue where Floyd lay in the street pleading for his life while Chauvin's knee plunged into his neck. The city also provided additional resources for stress and trauma relief specifically for the artists.

"To let artists and creativity lead in that moment when we were all struggling to process so much – it was beautiful to experience, a real community-driven way of listening and caring for one another," says Xavi, 45. Many of the artists used a portion of their funds to employ other out-of-work artists and restaurant workers. "It's kind of what the future could look like in any city courageous enough to try a different way," Xavi says.

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Photos: Raging Protests in Minneapolis



Yet one year later, as Floyd's convicted killer, former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, awaits sentencing, Xavi, Carroll and other community artists say Minneapolis remains a city mired in grief, a place as deeply in need of sustained, small, artist-led acts of engagement as answers to the calls for police and social justice reform.

Look no further, they say, than the death of [Daunte Wright](#), another Black man, just 20 years old, who was killed in Brooklyn Center, a Minneapolis suburb. Wright died from a single shot from the gun of a white police officer, Kim Potter. The shooting occurred as National Guard troops monitored Minneapolis and citizens held their breath waiting for a verdict in the Chauvin trial, perhaps even a return to civil unrest.

While Chauvin was unanimously convicted, artists say, neither justice nor healing has been fully achieved.

"There's still this fatigue hanging over the city," says Xavi, who is also a teacher and art historian. "It's like being shellshocked."

Samuel Ero Phillips, an architectural designer, chose the very intersection where Floyd was killed to build an outdoor pop-up barbershop, a project he called "Haircuts for Change." With the lure of a free cut, Phillips watched customer after customer relax into hard conversations about Floyd's death and the aftermath, which some liken to living in a militarized war zone as police and National Guard troops took over the streets.

"The trauma we experienced as a city from the impact of George Floyd's death and from the COVID pandemic demanded that something different be done for the community and by the community," Phillips says. "You can't just go back to normal when the eyes of the world are on you, and everyone is seeing just how systemic and deadly white supremacy and racial injustice are. Minneapolis needed a way to start its healing. We still need it."

Soon, the tiny three-person Minneapolis arts and culture office plans to engage local artists again through its Creative Response Fund and a new \$250,000 round of funding. The same goal is at work: a desire to expand access to stress relief and healing through neighborhood-based, artist-led projects.

"What we're learning in our city is that artists are not just the dreamers but the ones who bring imagination, which is the essential element in these movements for change," explains Sha Cage, a playwright, filmmaker, performance artist and activist who was among the first round of grant recipients. "It's imagination, even in times of trauma, that allows people to live in the dreaming space (of), 'OK, what does the road ahead look like? What do we want to build? What do we never want to rebuild again?'"

[**MORE:** [George Floyd's Family Lobbies Biden for U.S. Police Reform on Anniversary of Death](#)]

Cage's questions are at the center of what the grants will help Minneapolis explore. The majority of the new funds – \$200,000 – will be awarded to 20 artists applying for the first time. Each artist will have a year to complete their work.

"All of our artists are activists in the community already doing the work of supporting community," explains Gülgün Kayim, director of the office. "It makes absolute sense to provide them with resources to amplify that work, and hopefully, the healing. We're investing in the process of dialogue that happens, the act of engaging and having the hard conversations in creative ways. It's that process that can help people restore and recover. It's more important than a thing or object."

All of the funding is made possible by [The Kresge Foundation](#). Artists who received grants in 2020 will be eligible for grants of \$5,000 to support ongoing projects. "We're a city under stress," Kayim says. "The support for healing can't be just a one-off."

Carroll agrees. "I'm still so mad, and sad, and so broken. All the art I do is so that I don't end up in a ball or wanting to suddenly kill someone."

Carroll, 52, and her teenage son Morgan live on the city's south side, just three blocks from the intersection of 38th and Chicago Avenue. In the days and weeks directly after Floyd's death, Carroll visited what's known as George Floyd Square as an act of solidarity with other activists, artists and countless others mourning and protesting. But the weight of witnessing so much pain, while simultaneously trying to safely navigate life during a pandemic, took its toll.

"I'm exhausted," Carroll says.

In response, Carroll took the same advice she'd shared with her neighbors and looked for solace in art and creative expression. Soon after hosting the meal for 75 neighbors, Carroll began pouring herself and her grief into a ceramics project, with the hope of also inviting others to join her in conversations about the city's need – and her own – for safe, comforting spaces.

Using an indoor studio and kiln at the [University of Minnesota](#), Carroll built a 4-by-6-foot clay, womblike vessel with an opening at its center wide enough for up to two people to symbolically tuck themselves inside. The unnamed vessel became part of "Hungry for Next," a graduate-level public arts exhibition at the university's Katharine E. Nash Gallery. For Carroll, creating the cocoon-like object and sharing it publicly provided both unexpected personal catharsis and another compelling reminder of the depth of unresolved trauma that she believes many across Minneapolis are silently experiencing and embodying.

"I didn't realize how much even I was holding in and for so long," Carroll says. "There was Rodney King before George Floyd. The United States loves Black pain. We make box-office thrillers about it, but yet there's no priority around questions of healing and support. We're expected to just go back to some type of normal. But we need more ways of reimagining collective joy and relief."

In honor of the one-year "remembrance" – a term artists and activists are insisting be used over "anniversary" – of Floyd's murder, Cage is planning what she calls a joyful community act of release. She wants artists, citizens, activists – anyone, really – to blow bubbles with her as they gather at George Floyd Square. The idea, Cage says, is to show the possibility of creating simple acts of relief even in a time of rage. The ability to balance both, she says, is what makes artists essential workers in times of crisis and social upheaval.

"When we look at any movement in history, there's been an artistic component somewhere," she says. "Artists and expression are essential. We're the ones holding up the pieces of the sky, so they don't fall in on our heads."

[**MORE:** [George Floyd's Family Holds Rally, March in Brother's Memory](#)]

Kayim concedes that art and simple acts of creative community engagement like Cage's are not universally looked upon as solutions to social justice and reform. "There's this well-worn trope that a lot of people have about arts and culture, that it's really just a waste of energy," she says. "People see it as entertainment and decoration instead of as what makes us human and whole."

In Minneapolis, she says, the need for those reminders is stark, urgent and drenched in blood.

"Until police officers stop killing Black men and Black people, the need to support healing is always going to be there," Kayim says. "Our bodies hold onto stress and trauma. We can't just pretend our way back to normal. We have to have a way to take some of the pressure off. We can't do it cognitively. It has to be done emotionally and collectively."

Nichole M. Christian is a writer based in Michigan. She wrote this piece for [Island Press](#), a nonprofit publisher that receives support from The Kresge Foundation.