Through more than a half-century of demographic change, Watts has remained home for successive waves of low-income, poorly educated workers who migrated to California because their labour was needed in agriculture and manufacturing. Prior to the Second World War, the community had a large Mexican population, many of whom came to Los Angeles to work on the railroads. During the Second World War, large numbers of southerners came to California to work in a rapidly expanding industrial sector. Watts, one of the few districts in the city without racial restrictions, became overwhelmingly African American. In August 1965, long-standing resentments over poverty, police brutality, and racial discrimination erupted into a major urban rebellion. Thirty-four people died over six days of fighting, and a thousand buildings were damaged or destroyed. Watts has also long been a centre of a community-based arts movement. It is the site of the Watts Towers, an unusual site-specific assemblage work built by an Italian immigrant between 1921 and 1955 that is now a national historic monument. In the aftermath of the Watts rebellion, the Watts Towers Arts Center expanded its activities and explored how the arts might better serve the needs of poor and working-class communities. This article looks at the work of Sam Rodia, the builder of the Watts Towers, and Noah Purifoy, the founding director of the Watts Towers Arts Center, to explore the ideas motivating their work and the broader implications of their activity for understanding what promotes community creativity.
Sabato Rodia, born in 1878 in a small peasant community east of Naples, migrated to the United States at the age of fourteen and settled in central Pennsylvania, where his older brother worked as a coal miner. In his late teens Rodia moved to the West Coast, working over the years as a migrant labourer in railroad and lumber camps before settling in Los Angeles where he worked as a tile setter. In 1921 Rodia, estranged from his wife and children, purchased a large triangular lot in the working-class community of Watts, some eight miles south of downtown Los Angeles. He began to work on a large assemblage structure that he called ‘Nuestro Pueblo’, Spanish for ‘our town.’ Decorated masonry walls enclosed seven towers, the tallest nearly one hundred feet high, constructed with steel rods and reinforced cement. Next to his house, he put a gazebo-arbour, fountains, birdbaths, and benches. He decorated his structures with mosaics made from tile shards, broken dishes, seashells, and pieces of bottles. The walls are covered with impressions of hands, work tools, automobile parts, corn cobs, wheat stalks, and various types of fruit. For most of the thirty-three years he lived in Watts, Rodia encouraged his neighbors to visit and use his project. Weddings and baptisms were celebrated under the towers. As festive as these uses might be, Nuestro Pueblo offered no escape from urban reality. The towers suggest both church spires and modern skyscrapers; primeval stalagmite formations punctuating the site recall both cactus gardens and apartment buildings; the arbour with its incised designs speaks interchangeably of parks, the industrial world of automobile parts and construction tools, agricultural products, and of pure purposeless beauty. The major Long Beach/Los Angeles commuter railroad, the most heavily used railroad in the County of Los Angeles at the time, passed right by Rodia’s site. 35,000 to 50,000 people passed by his artwork every working day until the railroad closed in 1953.

By the mid-1930s, journalists began writing about him and his unusual project. Rodia told William Hale, who did a documentary film on the towers in 1952, ‘I was going to do something big, and I did.’ He wanted to leave a monument: ‘You have to be good good or bad bad to be remembered.’ His heroes were Copernicus, Galileo, and Columbus. ‘Poor class of people, today,’ he insisted, ‘they blind. When the man lookin’ for a job, he’s no free and they thinkin’ they free. Woman, too. Woman no free. Woman get a job in the store. You got to do what the boss want, wrong or no wrong.’

Preservation of the towers was almost accidental. In 1959, two young experimental film makers, both under the age of twenty-five, went out to Watts after seeing Hale’s film on Rodia’s Towers. When they learned that the city planned...
to demolish the site as a public safety hazard, they raised $3,000 from other young artists to buy the property and formed the Committee for Simon Rodia’s Towers in Watts. The committee included no major art patrons or representatives from major art institutions, nor were the city’s cultural leaders supportive of the effort to turn the towers into a cultural heritage monument. City and state officials, relying on the considered judgment of more senior experts in the arts, doubted that Rodia’s site was significant enough to warrant the expense of restoration or maintenance. The California Department of Parks and Recreation studied the project and concluded that it was ‘a sort of bizarre art form’ of such limited popular interest that the state should not acquire or maintain the property for public recreation purposes.

For younger artists during the so-called beat era, Rodia’s work provided Californians with their own indigenous synthesis of popular and modernist culture. It bridged the gap between art and life that Picasso, Schwitters, Picabia and others in the pre-Second World War European modern arts movements had tried to suture through the incorporation of found objects into paintings, collages, and sculptures. In 1962, the Committee for Simon Rodia’s Towers in Watts formed the Watts Tower Cultural Center to offer classes and organise exhibits. The committee hoped the new effort would develop community support for their project in a neighborhood that had become overwhelmingly African American in the years following the Second World War. Difficulties between the committee, organised and led by young whites who all lived in other parts of Los Angeles, and the local community continued until 1964 when the committee hired Noah Purifoy, an African American artist, to be the cultural centre’s first director.

Purifoy had grown up in Alabama. His parents had been sharecroppers, and his earliest memories were of trailing behind his parents and twelve siblings as the whole family worked hot, humid summer days picking cotton. When he returned home after the Second World War, he used his veterans benefits to get a masters in social work degree but he then decided to go to art school. After graduating he worked as a department store window dresser, and his home was a centre for the African American modern art community developing in Los Angeles. Becoming an artist had allowed him to have a somewhat privileged life, but in going to the Watts Towers, Purifoy found himself at ground zero of the nation’s urban disaster. The arts centre was only three blocks away from the heaviest fighting during the August 1965 rebellion. Standing at the back door, Purifoy and his students saw people from ‘the community making Molotov cocktails and throwing them at the police. They were buying nails and tacks from the hardware store and strewing them on the street to prevent the police from coming into the area.’

After the shooting and burning stopped, Purifoy led a group of students into the community to salvage objects from the rubble. Purifoy and his students constructed assemblages from the debris that they had collected. Purifoy wanted to believe that art could contribute to a healing process. The lessons learned at the arts centre had little to do with formal characteristics of art objects and had everything to do with the images a person formed of herself and her world. As art allowed a person to work with and transform those images, new types of knowledge were acquired:

We believed that an art experience was transferable to other areas of their activity and so forth and that if they could come to
the [Watts] Towers and have a good experience, a positive experience, they could take this experience with them wherever they go. It improved their self-image, and this would make a great deal of difference in terms of their ability and capacity to grasp whatever their objectives were, whether it was in school or out of school.  

He concluded that:

Within [each person] there’s a creative process going on all the time, and it’s merely expressed in an object called art. One’s life should also encompass the creative process. We were trying to experiment with how you do that, how you tie the art process in with existence.  

By ‘creative process,’ Purifoy was thinking about forms of learning involving manual and performative knowledge, activities that usually were not theorised but which grew through processes of trial and error. Manual knowledge depends upon habit and the acquisition of particular sets of muscular motions. Manual knowledge is closely connected to ‘experience’ and leads to an intensely subjective form of knowing that is literally incorporated into the nervous system. As anyone knows who has learned to play a musical instrument, a particular style of dancing or acting, or skills such as auto repair or sewing, body-knowledge need not be intellectualised, if by that we mean taught with verbal concepts. Imitation and practice may be the best ways to learn, so that performance does not require any linguistic loops and the self-consciousness that verbal reflection privileges. As a performative, rather than logical discipline, manual knowledge has long been highly developed in the fine arts, in which the final product emerged through a process of learning through building, taking apart, and rebuilding.  

Artists could fill a gap, Purifoy suspected, by developing strengths that people in the community already possessed, applying them to activities that were more interpretive than utilitarian, and then helping them make a leap from art practice as a specific form of manual and performative knowledge to reflecting on how the objects created synthesise ideas and feelings about important relationships. The technique artists imparted would not be limited by preconceived understandings because ultimately language remains external.
to its operations, even if what is done and the know-how that is acquired can be discussed. The object produced documented a problem-solving thought process that was applicable to a wide range of personal and community problems.

‘Sixty-six Signs of Neon,’ the show Purifoy put together of work built out of the debris of the Watts riot toured the United States and western Europe. Despite the attention and his own success and enhanced standing as a professional artist, he grew convinced that art as an institution occupying a definite place in modern society was in fact distinct from, and even antithetical to, the creative process that he believed was inherent to the human condition. Art, he thought, spoke only to relatively small groups of privileged people. In particular the art world, even when it recognised African American artists, still largely excluded most blacks and most poor people:

Art is a product of the creative process. You make a picture. It's a mere product. The creative process has all the steps and the guidelines to enable the artist to paint a picture or make art. The creative process answers all the questions regarding what the artist should do to end up with a picture that somebody would find value in. So the error we make is never looking at the creative process, but looking at the product, which is art. Now, my theory is that it is not art that's applicable; it is the creative process that's applicable.¹¹

He believed that the professional model was wounded from its inception: an inscription of boundaries that replicated the elitism of US society. Art should be a locus for aspirations for free subjectivity, but the life of contemporary artists kept folding back into itself and separating from the social forces that would deepen their vision:

‘Art’s been crammed down our throats by the elite for all of our lives, for centuries on end. For what reason, I’m not clear on yet, except that art was so mysterious that they wanted to set it aside only for the elite. ... I wanted to tell the world that this is untrue; that we are blinded by this concept and that therefore no one would try to analyse the creative process – note the word analyse – the creative process in terms of its applicability to something else.¹²

In 1976, his concerns about the relation of art to the community took a new form when Governor Edmund G. ‘Jerry’ Brown, Jr., appointed Purifoy to the California Arts Council, a new state agency run by and for working creative people. Only one of the nine founding council members Brown appointed initially was a businessperson and arts patron.¹³ Other original council members included the poet Gary Snyder, who served as the first chair; Luis Valdez, director of the Teatro Campesino; and the actor Peter Coyote.

Purifoy served as chair of the committee on education. He convinced Governor Brown to fund a pilot art-in-education program, California Learning Design, initiated in nine schools across the state. Artists and teachers were paired across different subject areas to develop new ways of presenting the curriculum.¹⁴ The experiment developed into an artist-in-schools programme that provided creative artists with full-time salaries for working twenty hours a week in schools, sometimes teaching special classes, sometimes working collaboratively with teachers to experiment with how art could enhance the teaching of traditional subject matter, and sometimes working with a small number of student-apprentices on their own projects. The federal National Endowment for the Arts had launched artist-in-school programmes in 1966, and most state arts councils had applied for federal funding to start programmes for their states. In these programmes, students were taken from school to a neighbourhood community centre where artists would demonstrate their crafts and students would occasionally have a chance to work with the artists in a workshop situation. Musicians came to school to perform. The new California programme developed more intensive connection between an artist and a community. Artists went into one school for a full year. Close interpersonal relationships between artists and students were a stated goal of the programme.¹⁵

The success of the artists-in-schools programme led to additional programmes that placed artists in community groups, senior citizens’ centres, hospitals, prisons, and other public facilities. Artists in residence performed and displayed their creative work, but the grants stipulated that traditional artist/audience relations were less important than interaction that stimulated the creativity of the people with whom the artist worked. The goal of the programme was for artists to convey their unique way of thinking to others through demonstrations, lessons, and discussions.¹⁶ Approximately two hundred artists were placed in communities around the state each year for the next decade.¹⁷ The Arts Council’s summary of its art-in-communities programmes provided a succinct version of Purifoy’s vision:

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Whenever artists engage with their material, they initiate a process, consciously or unconsciously, which amounts to basic problem solving techniques. From the first stroke on a blank canvas, relative color values, advance, retreat, etc. Each stroke is a step toward a solution, instantly evaluated; accepted, rejected, or adjusted as a process of completing the work. There is a state of mind concomitant with these decisions: attentive, fluid, relaxed and totally absorbed. It synthesises the apparent opposites of logic and intuition. We maintain that the creative process can be applied to any problem, whether aesthetic or social, and that artists may be the best people around to demonstrate that process, and to create situations in which it can be learned.

Many established arts groups complained that the Arts Council was hostile to their interests, particularly because the council refused to subsidise overhead and administrative salaries for large symphonies, museums, and opera companies. However, the new programme proved popular with state legislators, who discovered that their constituents liked the grass-roots approach and were willing to write hundreds of letters of support. Indeed, grass-roots arts programmes generated over five times the number of letters requesting continued support than major institutions were able to develop from their patrons and subscribers. The state legislature regularly increased the council’s funding, although after Republican George Deukmejian became governor in 1985, the council found itself working with an increasingly unsympathetic executive branch that while never overtly hostile to the council’s philosophy, remained unconvinced of its long-term value and preferred to see arts practice supervised by well-established institutions led by responsible businesspeople.

Public response validated Purifoy’s conception that people in the community had lost something valuable as art practices had developed into a modern, professionalised institution. Purifoy was convinced that the autonomy of arts institutions did not increase the quality of work produced, but it did lead to decreased interaction between the public and professional artists. Society at large received little extra benefit from its investment, other perhaps than the construction of more museums. Professionalisation of the arts diminished the innate capacities of the public by establishing an elite status for artists and their patrons and devaluing the general urge to respond to existence through creative forms. The public needed alternative art institutions that nurtured the role art played in everyday life.

The Art Council’s programme objectives stated unambiguously:

In modern America, following many centuries of cultural specialisation, the creative capacity has become the territory of certain highly trained and/or gifted persons who are increasingly drawn into the production of a commodity. The place of this commodity is only narrowly assured, and large numbers of people are now alienated from it. The society itself is bent on a course of growth and consumption which seems to render all other human values – such as beauty – expendable. For sanity and survival, we feel the priorities should be reversed. Highly trained and gifted artists are not a class apart, possessing something that the rest of us lack, but along with all artists great and humble, are bearers of a transmission we all share in, and are teachers to everyone of innate and healing powers of creativity and insight which grant every person in the land their own view into the intricate beauty of the universe.

Eventually, he thought, as more people in various communities developed a close personal connection with people whose lives were dedicated to creativity, they would understand the potential of art to assist in ‘problem solving’ and a broader range of artist-public collaborative projects would naturally emerge as long as the Arts Council was prepared to support innovative endeavors. These projects would allow Americans to explore and discuss questions of racial inequality, war and peace, the expansion of gangs, crime and punishment, substance abuse, or the crisis of the family in terms considerably more sophisticated than the mass media or traditional politics had fostered. The ultimate goal of the council’s programs would be to arrive at ‘a society so deeply dyed with art, craft, and style as to render an Arts Council unnecessary.’

In 1989, Purifoy retired and moved to Joshua Tree, a small community in the desert one hundred miles east of Los Angeles. In the desert, he began the second creative burst of his career, one that lasted until his death in 2004. He reconstructed two and a half acres into a sculpture park. Following the model of Sam Rodia, relying solely on will power and property rights, Purifoy worked to leave a trace of the ideas he had struggled with his entire professional life. Word of mouth spread about his project, and young people stopped by, interested in learning from him. Some provided the heavy manual labour that he needed to complete the
increasingly larger-scale projects he designed. People in Joshua Tree and the surrounding communities dropped off their refuse, giving him old refrigerators, brokenwashing machines, automobile parts, computers and other electronic equipment that no longer worked. One plumbing contractor donated several dozen toilets that could no longer be installed in California due to changed water-conservation laws. In 1999 a foundation formed to protect what Purifoy had created and to plan for a cultural centre that could continue after his death. Artist Ed Ruscha purchased an adjacent lot, which he donated to the foundation. Before his death, Purifoy had ten acres at his disposal.

His first pieces were large stand-alone sculptures. Constructed with shiny metal sheets and decorated with simple building construction materials such as heating duct tubing, Purifoy returned to ideas motivating _Breath of Fresh Air_ twenty-five years earlier. He spaced his sculptures around his site, setting them against the different vistas on the property of distant mountains, valleys, and desert flatlands defining the Joshua Tree area. He wanted the harsh high-desert weather with its constant winds, 110-degree-plus heat in the summer, and freezes in the winter to be an integral part of the sculpture park he was developing. He erected a thirty-foot-long, twenty-foot-high scaffolding in which he suspended sheets of brightly coloured metal. In this piece, which he titled _Mondrian_, he started out with a straightforward imitation of one of the constructivist masterpieces of the well-known Dutch modernist. Season after season, the weather rearranged the piece as it would. Whenever _Mondrian_ lost its formal coherence and no longer could be seen as the product of a dialogue between an art idea and a tough natural environment, Purifoy reconstructed it and the process resumed. A very different piece took shape in a large twenty-foot-square field, where Purifoy pinned down old shoes and clothes that he had collected into a large textile collage. Initially, he wanted the piece to have the rich colors and textures of a Bonnard or Vuillard painting, but over the years, weather and animals dulled the colors and pulled the materials back into the soil. The initial vision remained detectable in the juxtaposed shapes etched into the desert sand.23

While building the sculpture park, Purifoy also made large hanging wall pieces for sale. To get the money he needed to continue the desert sculpture park, he needed to sell more portable work. The questions he grappled with, however, remained those that had puzzled him through-

Noah Purifoy, _untitled work_, _mixed media_, Noah Purifoy Art Sculpture Park, Joshua Tree, California, 1996.
out his life. On the series he made from automobile and truck radiators that he took apart and then reassembled as abstractions, he observed:

When you see a radiator, you don’t see what’s exposed here. You see a rectangular or a square object, with tubes running out of it. That’s what you see. When you do art, you see beyond the object. That effort of seeing beyond the object is also present in human relations. You see beyond the individual into what he/she thinks and feels…

What’s underneath is always, almost, a surprise. To some of us. To me, no. What I’m doing is going back and forth, applying it to the object itself and then transferring it to people. The thing is never applicable to itself as such. … But looking at a radiator in a car, how often do we immediately transfer to the absence of knowledge about another human being who strikes us as being problematic, just like a radiator in a car, and want to know his full function, his behavior, in relationship to me or anyone. The relation is peculiar, meaning I don’t thoroughly understand my relationship with the human being. But I do thoroughly understand the function of a radiator in a car. Now, why doesn’t the function of a radiator in a car stimulate me to want to know, or transfer?

NOTES
4. The name Simon came from a 1937 Los Angeles Times article that incorrectly reported Rodia’s first name as Simon instead of either his given name Sabato or Sam, the nickname he used in most situations.
5. See ‘Watts Towers Study,’ State of California Department of Parks and Recreation, Division of Beaches and Parks, June 1965.
15. For summary of goals with evaluation of how effectively the goals were met, see Piper et al., California Arts Council Alternatives in Education Program, pp 1520.