



# Innovating Art Creation and Capitalization

Cliff Hocker

When Maya Freelon Asante found moisture-stained tissue paper in her grandmother's basement, she didn't see damaged goods. She saw an artistic medium instead: tissue ink monoprints and 3-D pieces. She has worked the medium into large installations that have covered museum walls and now she is continuing her exploration with a new project that incorporates the tissue paper art into a theatrical production.

Imagine a multimedia event unlike anything you've ever seen. Envision jazz vocals, lush tissue paper art, dance and the spoken word combined in an evening-length show. Picture a clothesline upon which colorful art is pinned to illustrate the points of a storytelling narrative. That thought you have constructed in your mind's eye is [The Clothesline Muse](#), a creative project conceived by jazz singer [Nnenna Freelon](#), choreographer [Kariamuwelsh](#) and visual artist [Maya Freelon Asante](#).

The three women, each distinguished in her own right in her respective discipline, plan to bring their concept to life in 2013. The premier of *The Clothesline Muse* will be at [The Painted Bride Art Center](#) in Philadelphia. The artistic trio has also secured venues in Baltimore and Durham, North Carolina, and hope to tour their production around the world. "The clothesline is a deep and wide metaphor for the ties that bind us, for the work of our mothers and grandmothers and what they sacrificed for us to have a better future," says Maya Freelon Asante. The clothesline is also a metaphor for games young girls historically would play after the washing had been done, taking down the clothesline for duty as a skip rope in the double dutch or hand-clap game. "It also leads us to the future. If you think about saving the Earth, if you think about natural ways to save energy and ways to be green, then we're right back where we started with the clothesline as well. So there are multiple metaphors what will be used."

Tissue paper art created by Asante will be suspended on the clothesline. Video will be projected on these hangings. Large-scale tissue quilts will be set in motion, moving almost as dancers would. "It's going to be really exciting, unlike anything you've seen on stage so far because of all of the elements we're bringing," says Asante. "There's going to be live music, spoken word. We have the dancers, and Nneenna Freelon, my mom, is the Clothesline Muse character. She actually weaves us through the story. She's the one who pins the story on the line, and the dancers learn from her."

## FUNDING IN THE 21st CENTURY

The developing project is also innovative in its strategies for raising capital. One approach is "crowd-funding." The group started a fundraising campaign through an organization called [USA Projects](#).

The campaign had a one-month limit for gathering tax-deductible donations specific to the project.

Asante says crowd funding is becoming very popular and that crowd funding over the internet is a 21st century phenomenon. "The great thing about USA Projects is it gives the community a chance to learn about our project and also participate in the actual making of it. So they feel they are a part of it as well. The idea is quite global. If we all put in a little, then we can raise a lot. A lot of younger artists are turning toward this when traditional funding has not gone through. It's a way we can be self-reliant and self-sustainable without having to go to big investors and have outside commitment. We can start right now with just what we can raise on our own. So people can give anywhere from one dollar to an unlimited amount of money. The average donation is anywhere from \$25 to \$100," says Asante.

Another funding route is via PayPal donations visitors can make on the [Clothesline Muse Facebook page](#). PayPal donations through Facebook are not tax-deductible. The money will pay for building an interactive website, rehearsal fees, costumes, set fabrication, music and recording fees, travel, and compensating a percussionist, designers for the costumes, set and lightning as well as a videographer making performance projections.

Maya Freelon Asante says crowd funding *The Clothesline Muse* project engages an initial network of contributors who share their enthusiasm. Interest in the project then spreads virally through each of the contributors' own networks.

"When it's a great idea, it keeps going. We wanted to open it up to the community and actually have them involved in the process of creating the work. As a funder, you see some of the behind the scenes stuff we're working on. You also

get exclusive perks. If you donate \$500 you get an original Maya-Freelon-created piece from the set. If you donate \$1000, you get a vocal consultation from Nneena Freelon privately one-on-one. If you donate \$25, you get to download a track from *The Clothesline Muse* soundtrack. Those are incentives for people to make donations at the different levels," Asante explains.

## NNEENA AS MUSE

On-stage personnel will be *The Clothesline Muse* character, performed by jazz singer Nneena Freelon and six female dancers. Sounds will consist of live percussion, live voice and recorded instrumental tracks.

With women being the mainstay of the creative talent -- writer, singer, choreographer, dancers -- one may wonder if the production will resonate primarily with women. Will there be elements with which men can identify? "It's not solely about women," assures Asante. "It's going to resonate well with everybody, every audience, young, old. Even if some of the young might not ever have seen a clothesline, it's an intergenerational dialog that will be pertinent to everybody, because even if you didn't do the wash yourself, your grandma or your mom did, and you had a connection there. Even if you are a young teenager, you still might do a hand clap in that game. You didn't know your mom knew it and your grandmother knew it, too. We've shared with men and women, and it always gets the same reaction, because everybody has those memories. They're shared memories, they're evolved memories, they're developed memories. They are all there," says Asante.

## THREE ARTISTS

"This is the culmination of three visionary artists' careers in a sense. Having these three minds come together so creatively -- and also we each bring something different to the table -- I can't really say there has been a precedent for this type of performance," says Asante. "But there has been a performance called *The Blueprint of a Lady* Billie Holiday tribute, which my mom was the lead for and she co-wrote with Ron Brown and his dance group. It also had live jazz, dance and live music on stage. This is different. We're taking it to another level with this project."

## MAYA FREELON ASANTE

Maya Freelon Asante's unique tissue paper artwork has been described by the [International Review of African American Art](#) as a "vibrant, beating assemblage of color." Her massive [tissue paper sculpture, "Ubuntu"](#), is part of the permanent art collection of the U.S. Embassy in Madagascar. She has also exhibited at U.S. Embassies in Italy, Jamaica, Swaziland and the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Her work is part of the critically acclaimed exhibition, *Material Girls* which premiered at the Reginald F. Lewis Museum in Baltimore and is currently traveling around the nation.

## NNENNA FREELON

[Nneena Freelon always brings the wow factor.](#) Six-time GRAMMY® Award-nominee Nnenna Freelon has earned a well-deserved reputation as a compelling and captivating live performer, most recently in 2007 on In Performance At The White House to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. At the [43rd annual GRAMMY Awards](#) telecast from Los Angeles, she inspired an enthusiastic standing ovation from 20,000 music-industry insiders and celebrities when she took to the stage. On her Grammy-nominated (for Best Jazz Vocal Performance) release, *Blueprint Of A Lady: Sketches of Billie Holiday* (2005), Freelon paid tribute to the quintessential jazz vocalist Billie Holiday. With her own band and with Ronald K. Brown & his dance troupe, EVIDENCE, Freelon created a multimedia music and dance offering unlike any show previously seen. Freelon is a winner of both the Billie Holiday Award from the prestigious Academie du Jazz and the Eubie Blake Award from the Cultural Crossroads Center in New York City.

## KARIAMU WELSH

[Kariamuwelsh is a choreographer](#) and professor in the dance department in the Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She received her Doctor's of Arts from New York University and her MA.H. from the State University of New York at Buffalo. She is the author of two published books by Africa World Press, Trenton, New Jersey: **Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices and An Aesthetic Analysis** and **Umfundalai: An African Dance Technique**. She is the editor of **The African Aesthetic: Keeper of Traditions** (Greenwood Press, 1994)

and **African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry** (Africa World Press, 1996). She co-edited **African Culture: Rhythms of Unity** (Africa World Press, 1985). Dr. Welsh is the artistic director of Kariamu & Co.: Traditions.

## ARTS & DESIGN IN THE FAMILY

[Philip Freelon](#), the father of Maya Freelon Asante, is one of the nation's leading architects. His firm, the [Freelon Group](#) wins large contracts for museum design and other major projects. After an international design competition, the team of Freelon Adjaye Bond/SmithGroup (FAB/S) was [selected](#) by the Smithsonian Institution to design its \$500 million [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#) to be located on the Mall in Washington, D.C. "It was initially a little difficult to get my mom and mother-in-law on board," says Asante. "By the way, we're all related, we all share a common bond. Kariamu Welsh is my mother-in-law, my husband's mom. And obviously, Nneena Freelon is my mom. So we have that unique bond, too. That is something that has been unseen before, as well."

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