

2025-2026



CULTURAL
INNOVATION LAB
at YALE

ANNUAL REPORT



CONNECTICUT
Economic & Community Development

**YALE
VENTURES**

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DIRECTORS INTRODUCTION



Frances Pollock

Director of The Cultural
Innovation Lab

The Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale is a dream three years in the making—and it is difficult to put into words what it means to see its first year take shape.

This work began with a simple but radical question: what would happen if cultural production were afforded the same infrastructure, strategic rigor, and long-term belief that universities and governments routinely extend to science and technology? For too long, artists have been asked to carry extraordinary public, intellectual, and economic value without meaningful access to the tools that allow other innovators to protect, structure, scale, and benefit from their work. CILY exists to challenge that reality.

Our first year was built around three interconnected pillars: incubation, brain trust, and capital architecture. Together, they form an ecosystem that asks artists, nonprofit institutions, universities, state partners, and private-sector leaders to participate in building a more durable cultural economy.

Through incubation, we launched Collective CT in collaboration with five Connecticut non-profit institutions and more than twenty-five artist teams. Over the course of the year, artists and institutions worked through business modeling, ownership, intellectual property, revenue strategy, minimum viable product development, and pitching. The work centered on asking artists to design the systems that best support their own creative practices, rather than adapting themselves to pre-existing institutional frameworks. In this model, nonprofit partners operated as incubators—providing space, resources, mentorship, and institutional support, while following the leadership of the artists.

This shifted the traditional dynamic toward one where artistic vision set the direction and institutions helped nurture and scale that vision. By the end of the year, participating projects had formed ten new legal entities, raised significant new resources, and presented their ideas publicly at the Yale Innovation Summit.

Through the Brain Trust, we activated a remarkable network of CILY Entrepreneurs-in-Residence: cultural leaders, scholars, producers, investors, lawyers, and civic thinkers who were willing to do more than offer advice from a distance. They came into the room. In parallel, our Think Tanks convened cross-sector leaders across two tracks: Public-Facing Scholarship, led by Dr. Michael Sy Uy, Associate Professor of Musicology at the University of Colorado Boulder and Director of the American Music Research Center, and Civics, Activism, and the Arts and Humanities, led by Rufus de Rham, Executive Director of the Connecticut Arts Alliance. Each track held its own arc, but we designed the experience to encourage real cross-pollination, creative exchange, and synthesis. This year's guiding question was: "In what ways does our training as scholars, activists, and artists condition us to avoid, disengage, or collapse in the face of public and civic engagement?" We also convened an additional Think Tank, "Opera is Dead. Long Live Opera," bringing together artists, producers, and institutional leaders to interrogate the future of the form and imagine new models for its creation, production, and relevance.

Through capital architecture, we are advancing the Lab's most ambitious proposition: that cultural work deserves the same seriousness of structure, ownership, and long-term investment as any other innovation economy. This pillar is building pathways to investments, earned revenue through cultural IP, partnerships, shared-value models, and evolved philanthropy—while insisting that artists and cultural institutions participate in the value their work creates.

Our inaugural Artist-in-Residence, James Rhee, made that vision real. A world-class, best-selling author, investor, visionary leader, and the architect of the expanding red helicopter® transmedia enterprise, James embodies the belief that care and financial rigor must coexist for success. His philosophy of “Kindness + Math” is profoundly rooted in the humanities and has challenged us to think bigger about what arts and culture can own, build, and become.

I am grateful to Josh Geballe, Jim Boyle, and the Yale Ventures team for believing that arts and humanities belong within Yale’s innovation ecosystem—and for helping create the institutional conditions for this work to exist. I am equally grateful to Liz Shapiro and her colleagues at the Department of Economic and Community Development, whose vision for Connecticut’s creative economy made this first year possible. Their belief in artists, nonprofit institutions, and statewide infrastructure has been both courageous and catalytic.

To our Entrepreneurs-in-Residence: thank you for bringing your expertise, generosity, skepticism, imagination, and care into this experiment. And to my Venture Associates—Claire Zhong, Mikal Martin, Maya Miro Johnson, Jon-Michael Taylor, John Richardson, and Adama Kamara—thank you for helping build this Lab in real time. You have brought rigor, curiosity, humor, intelligence, and an extraordinary willingness to do the (often unglamorous work) of making new ideas real.

This report is an early record of what became possible when people across sectors chose to believe that culture is not peripheral to economic life, civic life, or the innovation space. It is infrastructure. It is intellectual property. It is public good. And it is an engine of imagination powerful enough to build a better future—provided we are willing to build the systems that will let culture thrive.



Yale Innovation Summit
Arts Track 2026



**THANK YOU TO THE
CONNECTICUT DEPARTMENT
OF ECONOMIC AND
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT,
WITHOUT WHOM THIS PROGRAM
WOULD NOT BE POSSIBLE.**



Josh Geballe

Senior Associate Provost
for Entrepreneurship and
Innovation at Yale
University, Managing
Director of Yale Ventures

It has been our pleasure to support the launch of the Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale Ventures this academic year and witness its early impact in advancing Connecticut's position as a hub for cultural innovation and creative enterprise.

This year has brought unique challenges to the arts and culture sector: arts and humanities programs face uncertainty around student access to federal loans; public funding for the arts continues to decline; and many cultural organizations are navigating critical questions about sustainability and growth.

The Cultural Innovation Lab was created in response to this changing landscape, recognizing that new approaches are needed to build a thriving creative economy. This vision has been years in the making through a partnership with the Department of Economic and Community Development. It is now being championed by Liz Shapiro, Director of Arts, Museums, and State Historic Preservation, and Sheila Hummel, Director of Small Business Development Office.

Against a backdrop of world-class schools in music, art, architecture, and drama, innovation at Yale would be incomplete without considering

culture and the arts. Yale has taken a significant step by integrating the arts and humanities into the innovation ecosystem—placing them alongside science and technology as drivers of creativity, entrepreneurship, and impact. The Cultural Innovation Lab has bridged these traditionally separate worlds by adapting innovation frameworks and resources to meet the needs of artists and cultural organizations.

Under the leadership of Director Frances Pollock, the Cultural Innovation Lab saw the creation of ten new legal entities and \$1.35M raised by incubated projects. With a distinctive accelerator model that combines incubation with thought leadership and capital networks, the Lab provides Connecticut artists and legacy theatre institutions with the resources and encouragement to transform ideas into artistic value while generating returns for all involved.

More than ever, we are reminded of cultural innovation's importance. Without the marriage of arts and venture, too many promising cultural assets risk being stuck on drawing boards and on hard drives. Connecticut is primed to become the innovation hub for cultural production, and the state's support through DECD in collaboration with Yale is beginning to revolutionize possibilities for communities, artists, and society.

We are deeply grateful to DECD and the State of CT for its partnership and vision. Together, we are setting the tempo for a more connected, resilient, and dynamic creative economy for Connecticut's future.



Yale University
Campus Panorama



A LETTER FROM OUR FUNDER



Liz Shapiro

Director of Arts,
Museums and
State Historic
Preservation

The Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development is proud to support the Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale (CILY) as it reaches the end of its first year.

The arts are such a powerful force for connection and growth, and cultural innovation bridges artistic vision with public enjoyment. CILY takes the lead in bringing the historical pathway of translating research and development in other industries into public consumption into the arts—not only to sustain it, but to create jobs, develop communities, and contribute to the dynamic cultural landscape that makes Connecticut a vibrant place to live, work, and visit.

At DECD, we stand behind CILY's efforts to bolster the vital role the arts play in driving economic vitality and community identity in Connecticut and beyond. One year into a five-year program, an ambitious paradigm shift is underway, one that promises to carry enough momentum to allow the arts to flourish in an increasingly challenging environment.

Our state is taking a bet on our cultural infrastructure—and we are in a unique position to do so. Connecticut theaters are our cultural heritage and our future centers of innovation. They foster the perfect conditions for the transformation of our creative landscape. As incubators for artistic and economic development, our theaters are well-positioned to become pivot points for new paths to state and localized economic vitality. In light of unreliable centralized funding and support, we are supporting CILY in its efforts to create a dynamic ecosystem that aligns with the broader innovation ecosystem that DECD already supports.

Yale's history of excellence in arts & humanities and position as a leading research institution make Yale Ventures and the Cultural Innovation Lab the perfect partners to implement a new vision for our artistic economy. They possess fluency in the language that allows ideas to morph into impactful and enriching artistic ventures. With their creativity and leadership, we are confident that this program will continue to strengthen and inspire our communities while promoting economic growth in Connecticut and beyond.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Elizabeth Shapiro".

Downtown New Haven Skyline



Key Metrics

\$1.35M
Raised

25+
Participating Artist
Teams

22
Entrepreneurs-in-
Residence

18
Collective CT
Sessions

10
New Legal Entities

5
Non-Profit
Institutions

CULTURAL INNOVATION LAB'S ECOSYSTEM

by Mikal Martin, Venture Associate, YSM MM'27



I. INCUBATION

Supporting artists and cultural entrepreneurs in developing ventures, intellectual property, and scalable business models.



II. BRAIN TRUST

A network of Entrepreneurs-in-Residence, mentors, and subject-matter experts who provide guidance across finance, law, media, production, strategy, technology, and wellness.



III. CAPITAL ARCHITECTURE

Connecting participants to funding pathways, investors, philanthropic partners, sponsorship opportunities, and public resources necessary for venture growth.



Ye Jin Min, Unboxed Musicians Founder & Featured Yale Innovation Summit Arts Track Presenter



ECOSYSTEM PILLAR I

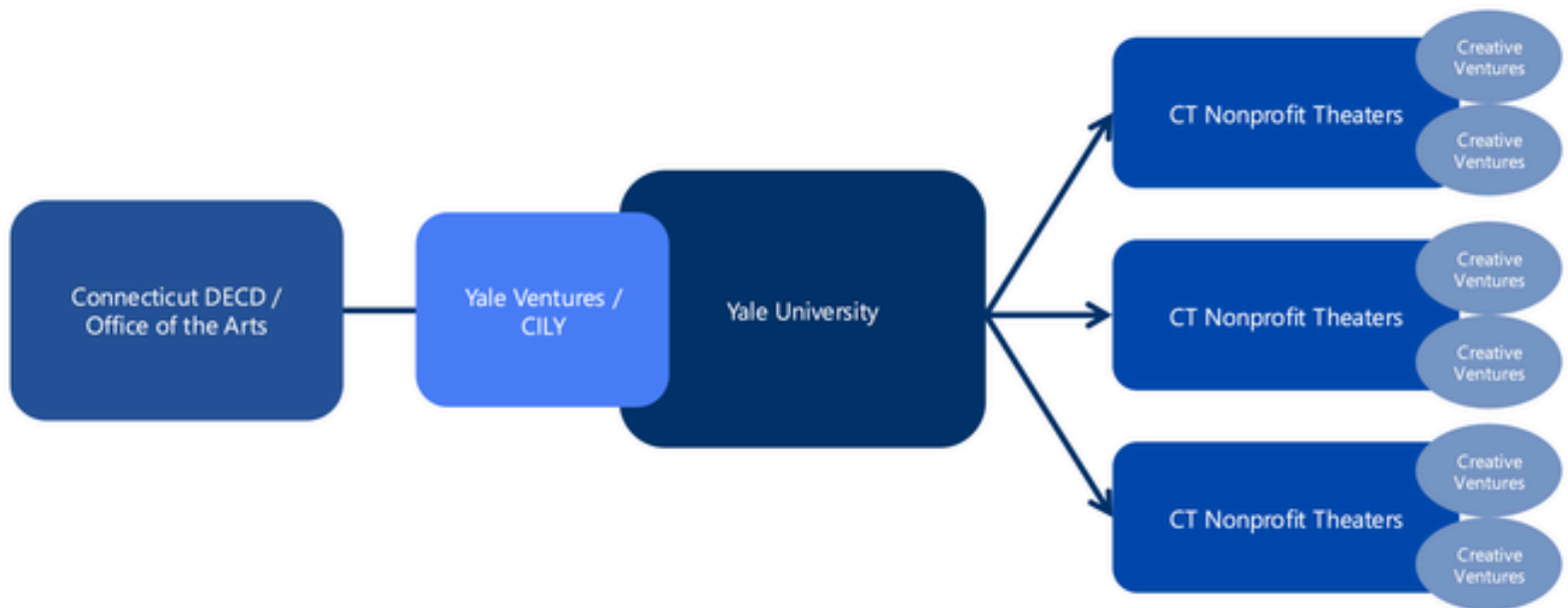
INCUBATION

COLLECTIVE CT

Program Description:

by Claire Zhong, Venture Associate, YC '28

Collective CT is the incubation arm of the Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale. It is a statewide accelerator developed in partnership with Yale Ventures, MOC Innovations, and the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development. It provides Connecticut's artists, cultural institutions, and creative entrepreneurs with the structured venture support—from business modeling and IP protection, to revenue strategy and capital access—historically available to other industries but rarely to the arts. Collective CT exists to close that gap, transforming cultural ideas into financially resilient ventures and ensuring Connecticut's creative sector can participate in, shape, and benefit from the economic value it generates.



COLLECTIVE CT INCUBATING PARTNERS:

Overview

Five theaters were selected to participate in Collective CT's pilot program as incubators. Each then chose artists whose projects could be transformed by entrepreneurship education.

by Maya Miro Johnson, Venture Associate, YSM MM'26

BUSHNELL PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

The Bushnell Performing Arts Center's Digital Arts Production Team, led by Ryan Glista and Patrick Langevin, ultimately focused its primary investment on launching *Worlds Beyond: Astranova*, a 360-degree immersive projection experience in a bespoke dome set-piece that combines digital and live action film elements. It was presented at Tsai CITY during the Yale Innovation Summit and was described by project coordinator Rebecca Ristow as "a beautiful gathering space for the arts track [at the Summit]".

"I'm impressed by the ambition of this program and how it places arts entrepreneurship alongside other innovation sectors. Work this ambitious will inevitably involve a learning process, but I believe it is deeply needed. I'm grateful to have had the opportunity to participate and excited to see how the program continues to grow."

—Ryan Glista

"Funders for the sciences will fund 15 failed drug trials before the 16th works. But when a venture in the arts fails one time, it loses funding – that's ridiculous."

—Jennifer Zembruski

GARDE ARTS CENTER

Jennifer Zembruski's 30 years of producing experience helped her team at the Garde Arts Center incubate a wide variety of projects. Zembruski praised the program for "looking at art and artists as creatives who have been forever a bedrock of our economy and finally saying they're entrepreneurs."

Their front-running project, an early education Social Emotional Learning program co-created by Justin Tucker and Erin Shea called *Poppi's Planet*, is already a successful YouTube series and regularly books live performances using puppetry and theatrics at schools, libraries, parties, and hospitals.

IVORYTON PLAYHOUSE

The stage of the Ivoryton Playhouse dates back over a hundred years and was graced by some of the biggest theater stars of the 20th century, such as Marlon Brando, Tallulah Bankhead, Betty Grable, and Groucho Marx. But even a historic theater recognizes the shifting economic realities of today's ecosystem and the blind spots in the non-profit model: "It was fascinating to hear what [Yale MBA student guests] heard [during pitches], because I heard something very different—they were looking for something I was not aware of," remarked Executive Director Jacqueline Hubbard. Through the program, Executive Producer Ben Hope has begun exploring reimagining ticket sales as small single shares of ground-up investment by audience members purchasing a literal share of the work.

Ivoryton Playhouse selected NYC theater veteran Kate Katcher's *A Fox in the Henhouse* for presentation at the Innovation Summit showcase.

"The moments [during the Summit where] I chose to go and see a talk [in the other sectors], that was incredible!

That's what I need, new ways of thinking, and for artists, new ideas for projects. And for those not in the arts, the art world might give them ideas about impact or collaborations that could make impact even greater. It's a waste to end up in your own echo chamber in your own industry."

-Ben Hope

"Artists think of the quality of their art as determiner of market value; what we had to do was convince them the quality of their art is not the determiner of economic success. The main purpose of the accelerator is to teach nonprofits to incubate artists in that context."

-Jon-Michael Taylor

"For every dollar given to the arts, seven are generated; we create income and drive tourism."

-Rebekah Moore

ARTS COUNCIL OF GREATER NEW HAVEN

The Arts Council of Greater New Haven was the only non-theater incubator in the program.

Their participation was conceived by Frances Pollock and Executive Director Hope Chavez as a pilot for how *all* arts disciplines can benefit from Collective CT. Supported by Student Assistant Daliya Habib and Venture Associates Jon-Michael Taylor and Mikal Martin, the Council selected artists from podcasting, culinary arts, visual media, youth programming, and storytelling disciplines who could rise to the challenge and "hit the ground running" as the very first interarts cohort, such as multimedia children's author Caela Collins and artistic engineer and interior design consultant Jasmine Nikole.

The rapid turnaround of the Council from hypothetical to successful incubator speaks to Collective CT's capability to serve artists' need for entrepreneurial agency.

THEATREWORKS NEW MILFORD

Within the grant funding model, artists are often expected to complete exactly the project initially proposed, even when the process uncovers new possibilities for revenue creation within a different product iteration. TheatreWorks New Milford Vice President McAdory Lipscomb Jr. applauded Collective CT's unique ability to allow and encourage artists to pivot, which all of his selected playwrights did. For example, frontrunner Winn City Studios began with a play about a fictitious dragon at a magic lake in Montana and transformed into Subscript, a "theatre for your ears" podcasting platform for original audio dramas, launching with *Relief Society*, a 7-episode series that has now been incorporated and distributed on multiple streaming platforms.

"There is clearly a vision and an effort to rethink the non-profit model that got everyone excited about it to begin with. It's creative and visionary."

-McAdory Lipscomb Jr.

CONCLUSION

Collective CT is happy to announce the 2026-2027 incubator cohort:

**Fairfield Theatre Company
Sacred Heart University
Goodspeed Opera House
Pequeñas Ligas Hispanas de New Haven
Seven Angels Theatre**

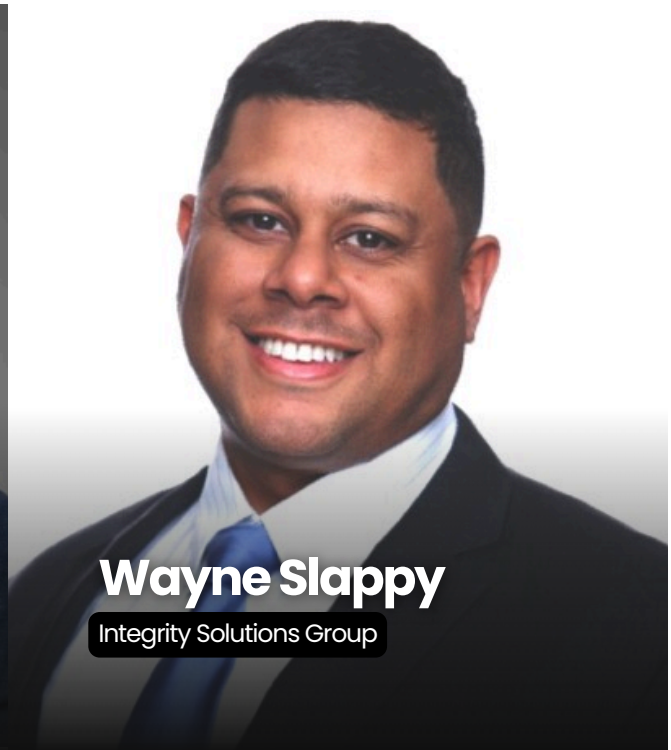
As we prepare to welcome them into the program, we also plan to continue developing five returning projects with strong team capacity, scalability, and total addressable market potential. The 2nd-year cohort's goals will be to develop a clear capital stack and a rigorous understanding of next steps towards venture readiness.

The projects are:

***Poppi's Planet* at the Garde Arts Center
Winn City Studios at TheatreWorks New Milford
Caela Collins at the Arts Council of Greater New Haven
Worlds Beyond at the Bushnell Performing Arts Center
The Bridge at Ivoryton Playhouse**

Providers

Four providers were brought in by Collective CT Co-Developer
MOC Innovations to lead curricular sessions on topics from
Mental Health and Wellness to Leadership.



Featured Participants



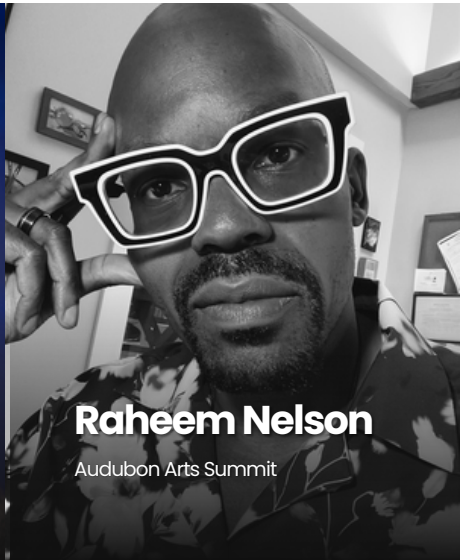
Tracie Cheng

Tracie Cheng Paintings



Ryan Glista

WORLDS BEYOND



Raheem Nelson

Audubon Arts Summit



Patricia White

Mrs. Whittle's Cottage



Mattie Jo Cowsert

God, Sex, and Rich People



Kate Katcher

A Fox in the Henhouse



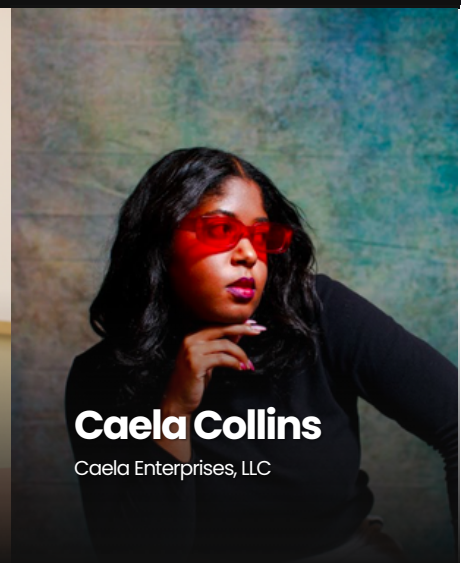
Jonathan Winn

Winn City Studios



Eoin Burke

Burke and Cheng



Caela Collins

Caela Enterprises, LLC

COLLECTIVE CT'S EMERGING VENTURES

Overview

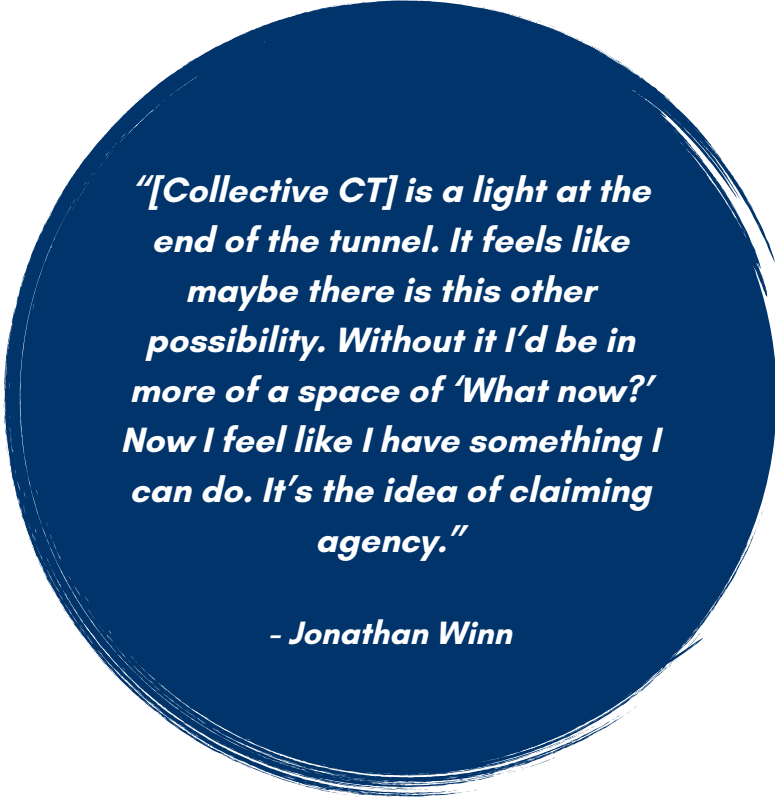
Five ventures were selected for highlighting based on their significant progress, promising models, and growing recognition. These ventures exemplify the impact of Collective CT's entrepreneurial ecosystem, demonstrating innovative approaches, strong development trajectories, and the potential for sustained cultural and community impact. All five were showcased at the Yale Innovation Summit Arts Track, May 27-28, 2026.

by Adama Kamara, SOM MBA'27 & Maya Miro Johnson, YSM MM'26,
Venture Associates

WINN CITY STUDIOS JONATHAN WINN

Jonathan Winn entered Collective CT with a single theatrical project and emerged with an expansive vision for how original scripted content can be developed, validated, and brought to market. Winn City Studios, Jonathan's audio innovation venture, evolved from an individual audio play into an audio validation platform that uses audience engagement data to help playwrights develop, test, and advance intellectual property for stage, screen, and other media.

Through Collective CT, Jonathan refined the venture's business model, capital strategy, and investor positioning, laying the foundation for an ambitious fundraising effort following the Innovation Summit as the company enters its next phase of growth.



"[Collective CT] is a light at the end of the tunnel. It feels like maybe there is this other possibility. Without it I'd be in more of a space of 'What now?' Now I feel like I have something I can do. It's the idea of claiming agency."

- Jonathan Winn

A FOX IN THE HENHOUSE KATE KATCHER

Kate Katcher entered Collective CT with a fully developed theatrical work and a clear objective: finding the producers, partners, and advocates necessary to bring *A Fox in the Henhouse* to production. Unlike many early-stage ventures in the cohort, the project's primary challenge was not development but execution. Throughout the program, Kate refined her presentation materials, explored potential partnership structures, and continued building momentum for a play focused on aging and the growing senior population. As the program concludes, her focus remains on securing production pathways, industry relationships, and development support that can move the work from pitch materials to the stage.

WORLDS BEYOND BUSHNELL PERFORMING ARTS CENTER'S DIGITAL ARTS PRODUCTION TEAM

While several projects remain in more traditional production pipelines (*Winterlight*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth* with the Museum of Science, *METROPOLIS* with Artechouse), *Worlds Beyond* rises to the top of the Bushnell's Digital Arts innovations. They built on their team's expertise in customizable multi-channel video installations, projection mapping, and 360 domes to create a new scalable immersive theater platform. *Worlds Beyond* launched its first immersive world, *Astranova*, at the Innovation Summit, which can also be presented as a standalone fulldome film. Through their investment with Yale Ventures, the Bushnell artists were able to benefit from media exposure across the greater Northeast and high-level proof of concept documentation of a successful pilot spectacle.

"They helped me get the project ready for private investors. I knew the entertainment business as an artist, but Collective CT helped me think about presenting it as a venture."

- Justin Tucker

"Collective CT contributed to the creation of an environment where artists and technologists could collaborate on new forms of immersive storytelling. Participants from a variety of backgrounds were able to understand the work, reinforcing that there is significant interest in new forms of digital media storytelling."

-Ryan Glista

POPPI'S PLANET JUSTIN TUCKER + ERIN SHEA

Having already amassed more than 75 million views, one billion impressions, and over 700,000 YouTube subscribers, *Poppi's Planet* joined Collective CT with significant audience momentum and an established national platform. Through the program, founders Justin Tucker and Erin Shea expanded the company's vision beyond digital content by developing a live experience vertical, including an original children's musical, while refining the company's investor strategy and positioning it for private capital. Today, *Poppi's Planet* is building toward a 360-degree children's entertainment company spanning digital media, live experiences, and future intellectual property development.

CAELA ENTERPRISES, LLC CAELA COLLINS

Caela Collins leveraged Collective CT to expand beyond a single book and advance a long-term vision for a multi-generational storytelling franchise. Building on her debut children's book, *Food Is Love*, Collins developed a roadmap for a chapter book series that grows alongside its readers, with future opportunities across merchandise, animation, film, and other creative extensions.

Through the program, Caela gained access to investors, entrepreneurial networks, and public showcases that strengthened the venture's visibility while reinforcing her identity as both an author and the founder of a scalable creative business.

The Arts Council of Greater New Haven, Caela's incubator, cited Arts Pitch Competition winner Christina Outlaw (pictured below) as a helpful mentor for the cohort as they prepared their pitches.

"[Collective CT] was honestly a safe space to think big. Nobody said, 'Are you sure?' I could say I wanted to build a storytelling franchise, and nobody looked at me like I was crazy."

-Caela Collins



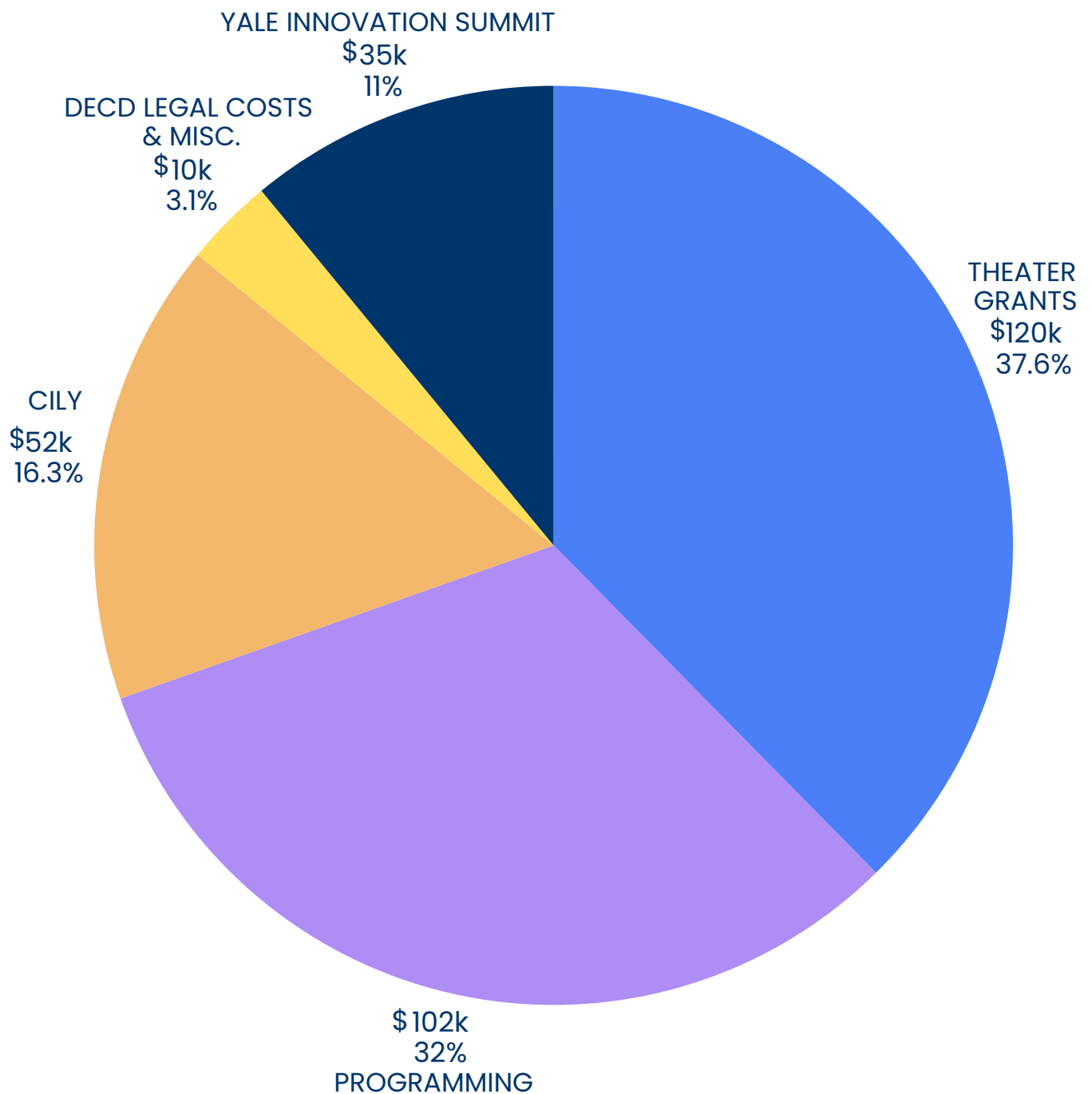
Christina Outlaw presents with operations support from Mikal Martin at the Summit

CULTURAL INNOVATION LAB'S FUNDING SNAPSHOT

Overview

By Mikal Martin, Venture Associate, YSM MM'27

This funding snapshot provides an overview of the resources mobilized through CILY to support venture development, ecosystem growth, and long-term sustainability. It highlights the capital, partnerships, and investments that have helped advance participant projects and strengthen the broader cultural innovation landscape.





ECOSYSTEM PILLAR II

BRAIN TRUST

ENTREPRENEURS-IN-RESIDENCE

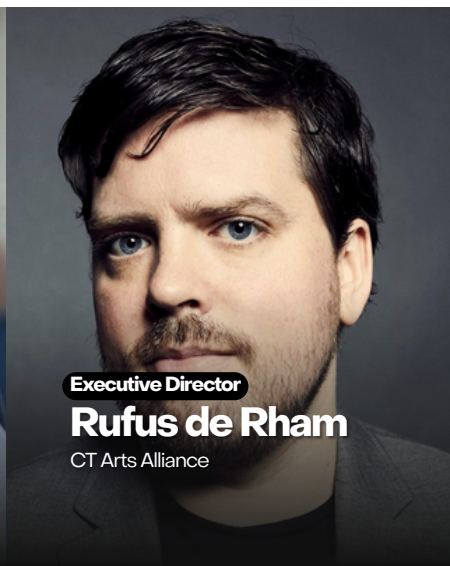
BY JOHN RICHARDSON, VENTURE ASSOCIATE, ISM MM'27

The Brain Trust pillar consists of a network of leaders and experts from across industries and around the world who share knowledge, mentor innovators, and help bring ideas into the spaces with the greatest impact. Entrepreneurs-in-Residence are the core of this network.

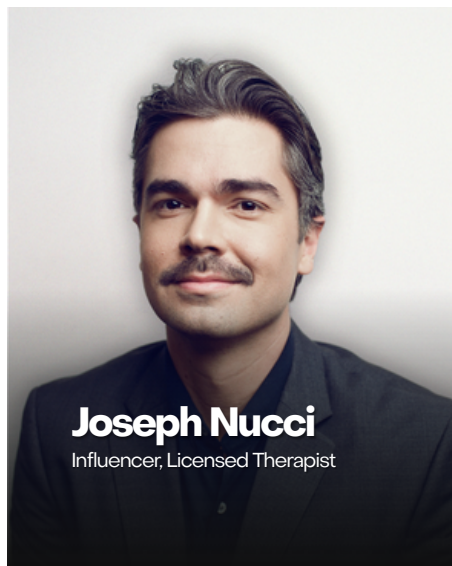


Joseph Kim, JD, presents to Collective CT, students, and members of the public at the Yale School of Music

Entrepreneurs-in-Residence



Entrepreneurs-in-Residence



Entrepreneurs in Residence



High Impact EIRS

CILY celebrates EIRs who have gone above and beyond in their collaboration with and support of Collective CT. These featured EIRs emphasized generosity and mutualism in helping spread CILY's message to a larger, national audience.

BY JOHN RICHARDSON, VENTURE ASSOCIATE, ISM MM'27



Mara Isaacs

**Executive/Creative Producer
Octopus Theatricals**

Mara Isaacs is a Tony® and Grammy® Award-winning creative producer, recognized as a leader in developing and producing new plays, musicals and multi-disciplinary work across the globe. Mara generates opportunity through the organizations and programs she creates, including Octopus Theatricals, which produced the award-winning musical *Hadestown*.

Mara invited director Frances Pollock and artist-in-residence James Rhee to the Milwaukee Repertoire Conference to present on the mission of CILY, MOCI, and Red Helicopter.



Michael Uy

**Professor of Musicology / Director
American Music Research Center**

Michael Sy Uy (he/him) is Associate Professor of Musicology and Director of the American Music Research Center. His main areas of scholarly research are on philanthropy, patronage, arts education, cultural policy, expertise and connoisseurship. His first book—*Ask the Experts: How Ford, Rockefeller and the NEA Changed American Music*—was published by Oxford University Press in 2020.

Michael led the CILY think tank on public facing scholarship, led the CILY panel at the Yale Innovation Summit, and invited director Frances Pollock to contribute to *Equitable Arts Infrastructures*, a publication out of University of Texas Press.



Michael Bobbitt

**President/CEO
Opera America**

Michael J. Bobbitt is a nationally recognized arts executive, producer, and artist with over 20 years of experience across public policy leadership, organizational transformation, and creative practice. Michael is currently President and CEO of OPERA America, leading the national service organization for the opera field from New York City.

Michael participated in two CILY think tanks and invited director Frances Pollock and artist-in-residence James Rhee to participate in the Opera America Conference.

Think Tank Retreats

By Mikal Martin, YSM MM'27, Maya Miro Johnson, YSM MM'26, & John Richardson, ISM MM'27, Venture Associates

Fall 2025: *Public-Facing Scholarship & Civics, Activism, Arts and Humanities*

Spring 2026: *OPERA IS DEAD. LONG LIVE OPERA.*



WHAT ARE CILY THINK TANKS?

Think Tanks are small, interdisciplinary gatherings that interrogate why public-facing work in the arts and humanities so often collapses under institutional pressure. Throughout the year we hosted three retreats to tackle these problems. Participants lived, ate, and worked together for 1-3 days while tackling some of the biggest challenges in arts and humanities today.

This year's think tanks produced the idea of **SPARKS**, prototypes in miniature that tests a single hypothesis. They are designed for velocity, curiosity, and transparency: minimal risk, maximum learning.

Think Tank SPARKS are the translational engine of the Cultural Innovation Lab's Brain Trust pillar. They exist to test how ideas generated through dialogue—including ethical frameworks, civic models, pedagogical hypotheses—might behave in the world.



Alexandria Carrico, Sarah Wilber, Michael Uy present to students during their think tank residency



EACH SPARK SHOULD:

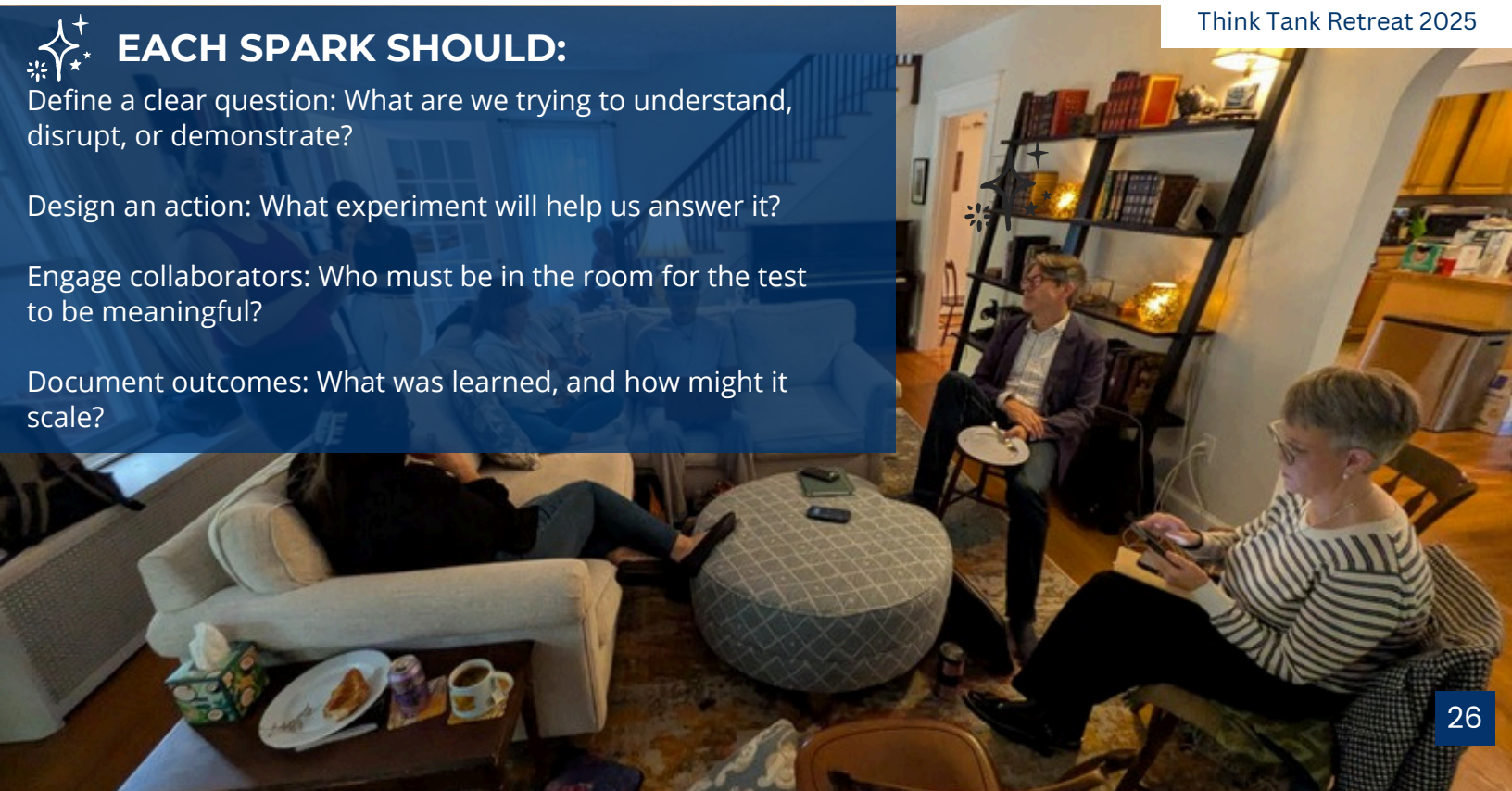
Define a clear question: What are we trying to understand, disrupt, or demonstrate?

Design an action: What experiment will help us answer it?

Engage collaborators: Who must be in the room for the test to be meaningful?

Document outcomes: What was learned, and how might it scale?

Think Tank Retreat 2025



**ECOSYSTEM
PILLAR III**

**CAPITAL ARCHITECTURE:
*RED HELICOPTER***

A New Architecture for Culture: James Rhee as CILY's Inaugural Artist-in-Residence

by Claire Zhong, Venture Associate, YC '28



An Artist-in-Residence is, at its most fundamental, an invitation: an institution extending itself toward a practitioner whose work and worldview it believes can change the nature of the place. It is not a lecture series or a consulting engagement. It is a sustained, reciprocal commitment: the artist brings their practice into the life of the institution, and the institution adapts to what that practice demands. The Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale understood this when it created the role. It understood it even more clearly when it chose James Rhee to fill it.

Rhee is, by any conventional measure, difficult to categorize. He is a former high school teacher, a Harvard-trained lawyer, a private equity investor, and a CEO who led one of the most celebrated corporate reinventions in recent memory at Ashley Stewart—a transformation rooted not in extraction, but in trust, mutualism, and what he has long called "kindness plus math." He is the author of the global bestseller *red helicopter: a parable for our times*, and the architect of an expanding transmedia franchise that spans music, education, film, technology, and civic investment. He is, in the fullest sense of the word, a builder: of companies, of systems, and now, increasingly, of culture.

That is precisely why he was chosen as CILY's inaugural Artist-In-Residence. CILY's Capital Architecture pillar exists to support cultural works that pioneer new production models, new ownership structures, and new approaches to long-term economic viability. Rhee does not theorize about these things. He executes them. His appointment as inaugural Artist-in-Residence was not a safe choice. It was a deliberate and provocative one, a signal about what CILY believes culture can be and who it believes should be building it—and owning it.

Key Milestones:

by Maya Miro Johnson, YSM MM'26, Venture Associate

November 3rd, 2025:

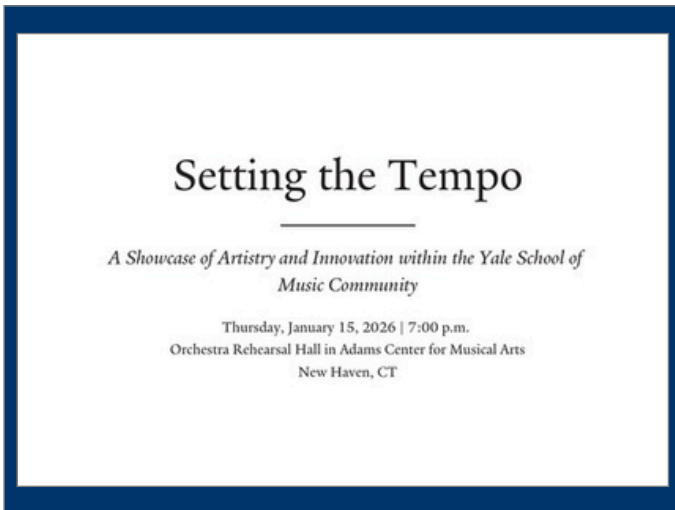
The Lemonade Stand

Presentation to Collective CT on his philosophy of kindness and math, inspiring them to identify their own “red helicopter stories.”



January 15, 2026: Setting the Tempo

A workshop presentation and open dress rehearsal of *red helicopter: An American Rock Opera* at Hendrie Hall by Rhee, Yale School of Music students and composers Jasmine Barnes, Ye Jin Min, and Frances Pollock.



March 28, 2026: red helicopter®

The second performance of *red helicopter: An American Rock Opera*, paired with a fireside chat and public gathering demonstrating the Lab's core belief that cultural production and civic life are not separate.



May 27-28th, 2026: James' Keynote Address at the 2026 Yale Innovation Summit Arts Track

A subject of the next chapter for cultural production rooted in artist agency, shared value creation, new financial models, and the belief in creative sector market value.



Taken together, these events represent something larger than a residency. They are the minimum viable product of a cultural architecture that Rhee is building toward—one with the ambition, structural rigor, and long-term vision likened to the cultural universe Disney constructed across the twentieth century. That is a statement of intent: red helicopter® is as much a way of being and an operating system as it is any single vertical or asset.

From a \$1 million commitment to cultivating the red helicopter® brand through an open RFP process to the hours upon hours each week spent in office hours with students and Connecticut-based artists, Rhee has shown up consistently and generously—using his time, talents, and resources to make our community better. That quality of presence, that willingness to be genuinely in the room, is what distinguishes a residency that transforms an institution from one that merely adorns it.

CILY was not created to repeat what already exists. It was created to attempt what does not; to build the kind of table where avant-garde artists and private equity investors, civic leaders and student entrepreneurs can find themselves in the same conversation, whether or not they expected to be there. James Rhee, who has spent his career moving fluently between those worlds and insisting they are not as separate as we pretend, is exactly the right person to be first at the table.



*New Haven, Tell Your Red
Helicopter Story
March 2026*

REFLECTION

by John Richardson, Venture Associate, MM '27, Yale School of Music

I'd like to admit right up front, I know virtually nothing about venture capital. I'm currently a student at the Yale School of Music studying classical voice, and before that I was a history major. So, when I was assigned to write a thought piece about the arts investment landscape, I, to my great shame, asked an AI bot to give me a summary. I asked Claude (my AI of choice) for examples of artistic intellectual property in the news and it dutifully provided me the list, predictably spitting out examples like Taylor Swift's acquisition of her own songs, or Bruce Springsteen's sale of his catalog.

While the examples were all helpful, what I think was most interesting about my foray into AI was an unprompted paragraph that Claude provided at the end. After providing the examples I had asked for, it gave me some analysis of its own, which was this: "The overarching trend is that IP has shifted from being a byproduct of creative work to being the *primary asset*—studios, tech companies, and private equity firms now treat artistic catalogs the way investors treat real estate or commodities."

So, there it was. This little paragraph justified, in my mind, my recent decision to join Frances Pollock's team at the Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale. More importantly, I think it justifies Yale's decision to be the first major organization of its kind to take such a bold step in recognizing the innovation potential in supporting original artistic ideas. But most importantly of all, it proves that Frances is as savvy as they come.



She saw something on the horizon that most of the world has yet to even recognize, and with Yale's partnership, is standing on the edge of something truly revolutionary—the university could be incentivized to support the arts and humanities in the same way it was incentivized to support STEM.

Frances was right to seek out partnership with an R-1 university. In America, R-1 universities are uniquely poised to drive innovation. Allow me to nerd out with my historian hat on. The Bayh-Dole Act of 1980 was seminal. It allowed universities in America to retain ownership of the intellectual property they developed using government research funding – as opposed to splitting the revenue with the government funders. While this meant the US government wasn't seeing a direct return on investment, the indirect returns have been enormous, with the US becoming a global powerhouse of technological innovation.

The application of Bayh-Dole to the medical and life science fields was obvious. If universities, using their grant money, developed a new medical technology, they could leverage that new idea to bring in potentially substantial revenue. They could sell their original concept to a pharmaceutical company or invest in the creation of a new company to manufacture and sell the technology. Regardless of how they chose to wield the intellectual property they owned, the fact is, owning that intellectual property was extremely valuable.

Now then, consider again Claude's claim that artistic intellectual property is moving from being a byproduct to being a primary asset, and that these assets often exist in one of the most robust sectors on earth: the cultural industry. It would make sense that just as universities prioritize the development of scientific IP, they would also seek to diversify their portfolio and tap into one of the world's largest markets.

This is what CILY does. It asks: why not replicate the already existing innovation landscape in STEM, but with the arts? As Claude pointed out, the corporate arts world was already moving in that direction, and Yale could be the first university to seize the moment. Yale works with the state of Connecticut to receive a dedicated fund for arts innovation, just as science and tech receive government grants for their research. Yale then uses that funding to incubate artists looking to create original output: be that a film script, a children's book, or a musical. Then, and this is the crucial part, Yale supports the artists in protecting and leveraging their IP. Just as a research scientist might not know exactly how to protect and leverage their invention in the best way, so too do artists deserve support in controlling their creation and benefiting from it properly.

A university setting is ideal for this process. It already knows how to secure patents in science and technology. Its access to government funding, and its ability to profit from original creation, incentivizes bold creativity. While companies in the private sector tend to seek out fully fledged products that reduce risk, universities can start with just a nugget of an idea, and, within the safe confines of their walls, develop it into something that could go on to have a big impact in the world.

And there is no better university than Yale to be stepping out into this venture. Yale is known as the arts and humanities Ivy. It is the only R-1 university with professional schools in music, art, architecture and drama. As a member of the School of Music, I find it extremely exciting that I could pair my experience as a budding professional artist with work to change the very landscape that I will shortly be entering.

As you have seen in this report, CILY, in its first year, is already seeing the fruits of its concept. Ten artists were able to create legal entities to protect intellectual property they created with Yale's support, and over the course of the year they have worked with industry-leading professionals to learn how to maximize the potential of that property. As the lab moves forward, we hope to garner even greater buy-in from Yale's professional schools and from the larger investment community. As individuals and institutions buy in, the very landscape of how we create art and culture in America can change. Artists can enjoy greater security as they create, and more power and earning potential over the things they create. As a student who is investing his time in a professional arts school, that is the kind of arts landscape that I want to live in.

Cultural Innovation Lab

Meet Our Team



Frances Pollock

Director

Frances Pollock is a composer, producer, and cultural strategist whose work bridges artistic creation and systems change. A 2026 Yale School of Music DMA graduate, she founded Midnight Oil Collective and co-created the Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale, advancing new models for artist ownership, cultural innovation, and sustainable creative economies.



Claire Zhong

Co-Chief of Staff

Claire is a junior in Yale College studying Cognitive Science and Data Science who is deeply passionate about the intersections of venture, strategy, arts, and impact. A classically trained pianist and singer, Claire sings with the Yale Glee Club and serves as Managing Director of the Opera Theatre of Yale College. She also co-leads Yale's Girls Into VC chapter, and is the President of Yale Undergraduate Net Impact.



Mikal Martin

Co-Chief of Staff

Mikal is a tubist, educator, and arts advocate pursuing a Master of Music at the Yale School of Music. A Sphinx Artist, Presser Scholar, and Air Force Band Diversity Fellow. Mikal was a finalist for the The United States Army Band 'Pershing's Own', winner of the Yale Chamber Music Competition, and finalist in the Frances Walton Chamber Music Competition and MTNA Chamber Music Competition. He is committed to advancing education, entrepreneurship, and community engagement through music.



Maya Miro Johnson

Venture Associate

Maya Miro Johnson is a composer-performer whose multidisciplinary work explores technology and illness in the body and has been presented globally from Svalbard to Tokyo. She holds a BM and MM in composition from the Curtis Institute and Yale and will begin her PhD at Brown University in 2026 after spending the summer supporting Connecticut's arts economy through CILY.



Jon-Michael Taylor

Venture Associate

Currently in New Haven, CT, trumpeter Jon-Michael Taylor is co-founder of Solaris, an entertainment startup, and a member of New Horizon Brass. His career spans the areas of arts consulting, creative production and organizational leadership. His newly formed organizations have raised \$50k in grant and donor funding in the past year, and his network spans from leaders in venture spaces to pioneers for educational nonprofits and arts-cultural institutions.



John Richardson

Venture Associate

John is a professional vocalist pursuing a Master's in Music at the Yale School of Music. Before Yale, John enjoyed a freelance career as a gigging singer and concert reviewer in Washington DC. John has a BA in history from Brigham Young University and an MSt in history from the University of Oxford. John currently works with the Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale Ventures, hoping to address the underlying issues surrounding arts funding.



Adama Kamara

Venture Associate

Adama Kamara is an MBA candidate at the Yale School of Management and a Summer Associate with the Cultural Innovation Lab at Yale Ventures, where she supports founders and capital architecture initiatives. Adama is passionate about building sustainable businesses at the intersection of arts, culture, and civic engagement. Her background spans public finance, strategy, and creative storytelling, with a focus on helping organizations turn ambitious ideas into lasting impact.

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