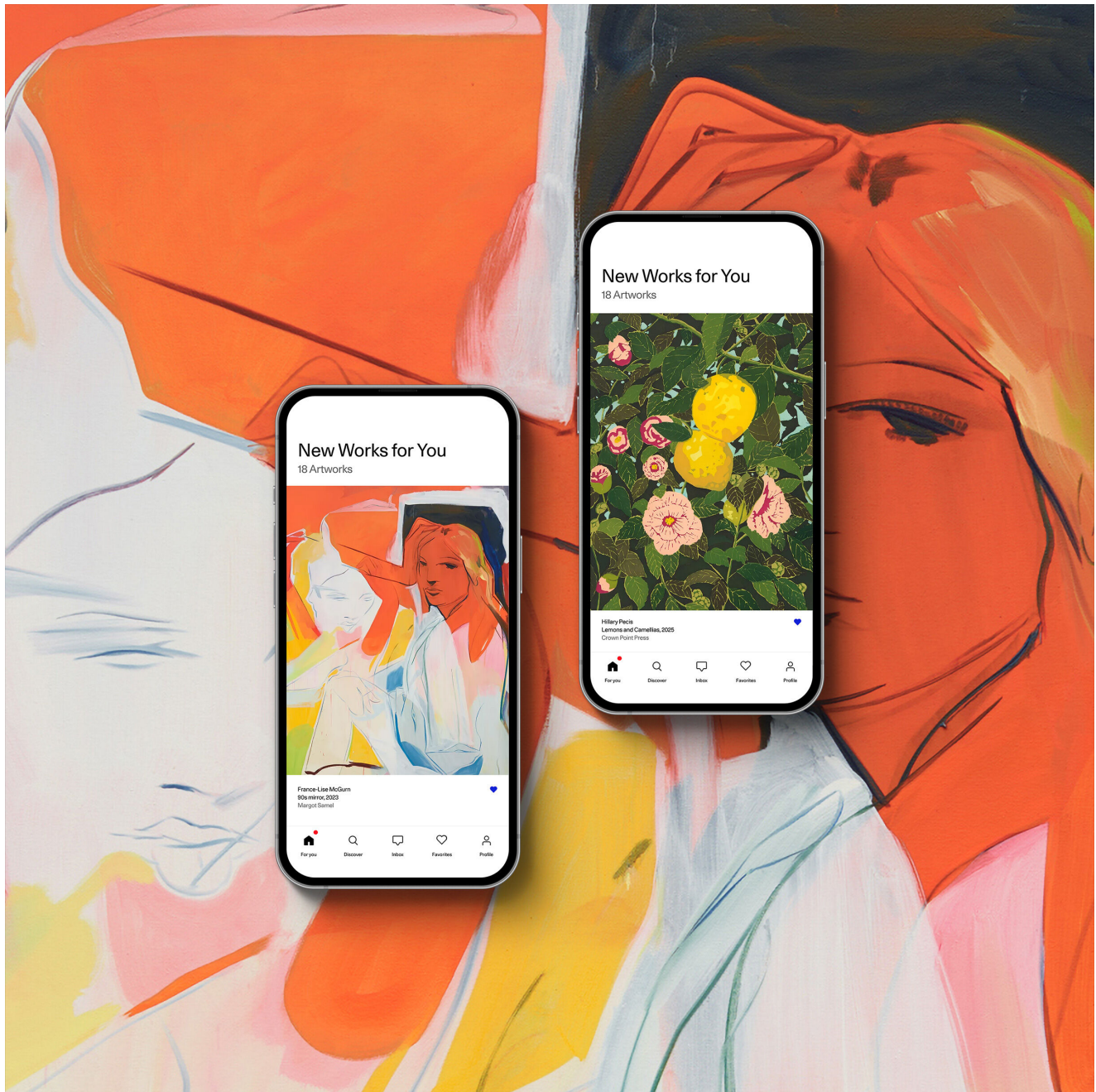


# Upstart Co-Lab Wants Businesses to Hire More Artists

 [artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-businesses-hire-artists](https://artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-businesses-hire-artists)

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August 1, 2017



Creativity

Photo by Marta Xochilt Perez for Artsy.

We're used to the common narrative of the artist as someone so inspired that they simply can't stomach a drab office job, preferring to ditch the cubicle for the white cube. And yet, research has found that employers almost universally report creativity is of increasing

importance in the “traditional” workplace.

According to a 2008 survey, 85% percent of employers looking to hire creative employees reported were “difficulty finding qualified applicants.” Yet the same survey found 57% of respondents citing arts degrees as being reflective of creativity. More recent research from IBM found that CEOs think creativity will be the most valuable skill around the office. But that begs the question: if there is a purported interest on the part of companies, why aren’t there more arts majors actually working in offices?

Partly, it’s because the value and importance of integrating artists into their existing structures is still not fully embraced by businesses, argues Laura Callanan, founding partner of the non-profit Upstart Co-Lab. Along with Emergence Creative, a creative agency, Upstart Co-Lab is creating a three-part campaign to “highlight the massive potential of artists as innovators,” according to a document accompanying the first part of the initiative released this summer. The campaign will promote the idea of what Callanan dubs the “artist-innovator” in order to increase opportunities for individuals and to bring additional investments to the creative economy.

In many cases, a solution might be staring companies right in the face. “While employers are seeking out more creative workers, they may be overlooking the more than 2 million working artists and 60,000 annual graduates of art schools in America today,” the report reads. “This large, skilled, and highly trained workforce represents a much needed, yet overlooked segment that can provide value to business, government, and the social sector.”

“You need people who aren’t just falling in step with the way it’s been done before,” said Callanan, who formerly served as senior deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts. Callanan argues that artists bring singular problem-solving abilities, challenging the received wisdom around how a given issues needs to be tackled. “You especially want [artist employees] at the early stage of a new initiative, to ask the questions that aren’t obvious,” Callanan said.

Companies shouldn’t be thinking about bringing artists to simply place them in traditional art-related roles (like Creative Director). Rather, artists should be recognized for their wide range of skills and integrated into a team looking to address a specific problem *beyond* the arts. In the report, titled “Great Minds Don’t Think Alike,” Upstart Co-Lab spotlights research on the benefits of artists in the workplace—including creative thinking, innovation, and diversity of thought. It also outlines the next phases of its initiative, which will center around the creation of “mainstream support” for the artist-innovator along with toolkits businesses can use to help them find such creative hires.

This isn’t to suggest, as Callanan readily acknowledges, that all artists should consider a diversion into the corporate world. “I’m not trying to twist anyone’s arm and say ‘get out of the studio and go work for IBM,’” she said.

Indeed, hiring practices are only one aspect of Upstart Co-Lab's mission. So far, much of the attention paid to the nonprofit has centered around its mission of bringing the arts a share of "impact investing," which channels private funds towards "companies, organizations, and funds with the intention to generate social and environmental impact alongside a financial return," according to a definition from the Global Impact Investing Network (GIIN).

Philanthropy across the United States amounted to a \$373 billion in 2015, with the arts and culture fields getting about 5% of that. "We can't expect that there's going to be a lot more resources for artists doing socially meaningful work if we're just looking at the philanthropy pot," said Callanan. By contrast, impact investing is a \$8.7 trillion industry in 2016 with 0% going to arts and culture. Channeling some of those funds to socially engaged art, Callanan argues, represents a huge opportunity. "If we can open up the spigot just a little bit, the scale of the resources is enormous."

Just like not all artists are ripe for the boardroom, Callanan notes not all socially engaged art is right for impact investing, which is expected to see a financial return on investment. Arts nonprofits like Creative Capital, the Rauschenberg Foundation, or A Blade Of Grass, offer artists flexibility and the potential for failure in a way that impact investing might not. But Callanan argues that artists working in the vein of Theaster Gates (who Upstart Co-Lab cites as a clear example of an "artist innovator") and Rick Lowe—both with socially engaged practices that engage with the wider world—can benefit from broader sources of funding other than strict arts philanthropy dollars.

A 2017 report from Upstart Co-Lab outlines a few projects that could benefit from such investment, such as Stockade Works of Kingston, New York. That project has already received a \$1 million economic grant from New York State (not from its arts funding wing, however). The 70,000-square foot facility will provide training and infrastructure to nurture the film and television industry and provide long-term jobs.

So what does overall success for Upstart Co-Lab's initiative look like? An uptick in impact investing in the arts? An artist in every office? For starters, Callanan is mainly looking for a broader culture shift in the zeitgeist when it comes to the perception of the arts, both inside and outside the industry.

"If in 15 years from now you and I talk again, and the MFA programs are offering a different curriculum than what's there today—one that talks about artists as innovators, the stages of innovation, how they're the same or different from the creative process, how you engage with a community to understand their needs, how you talk to social investors," said Callanan, "that to me is going to indicate this idea caught on."