

ALJIRA, INC.

BRIEF HISTORY OF ORGANIZATION

Aljira, A Center For Contemporary Art, began in 1983 as a collective of artists who wanted to share inexpensive studio space. Inspired by the visions of artists Victor Davson and Carl Hazlewood, Aljira evolved into an exhibit space for New Jersey and other artists. The word ALJIRA comes from the Aborigines and refers to a Utopian "Dream-time". True to the visions of the founders, this word encompasses a concept of timelessness and open possibilities -- ideas inherent in the creative process.

Two years after its inaugural exhibition in 1984, Aljira had established a reputation within the New Jersey arts community as an important non-commercial setting for presenting high-quality art. By 1987, there were developments in Aljira's program marked by the departure from a preoccupation with only formal concerns to a focus on issues directly related to its local and cosmopolitan constituency. Exhibitions such as MASS, guest curated by Group Material, dealt with ideas about high culture/low culture; WITH AND WITHOUT ACCLAIM: INTERNATIONAL BLACK AND HISPANIC ARTISTS, was seminal to this new approach. ART FROM THE AFRICAN DIASPORA, a series of 4 exhibitions, represented an important shift philosophically for Aljira, in that it marked the change from simply considering a work of art as a formal object on a white wall, to the view of art as part of an overall sociological, historical, and political context. This approach has led to an educational component emerging as related lectures, slide presentations, and more recently, a poetry series.

Traditionally, Aljira's audience has been one with extreme differences in age, class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. By supporting both emerging and established artists from a variety of national and ethnic backgrounds, Aljira has secured a special place in the cultural life of the Newark, New Jersey, area with its multi-ethnic population. Since 1984, this Center has presented the work of more than 250 artists from the United States, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

In addition, while traditional European and North American artists have established marketplaces to show their work, the same is not true of artists who are "racial and ethnic minorities". Aljira is uniquely positioned not only to present the work of these artists, but to promote it.

In 1986 Aljira upgraded its promotional material and, in 1987, developed a brochure through an in-kind grant from the Prudential Foundation which played a major role in marketing the Gallery. Aljira promoted the exhibition program with the help of a public relations consultant which improved visibility in the press and generated increased Gallery attendance.

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(continued)

In March of 1988 Aljira formally became a participant of Young Audiences of New Jersey, part of a national program to educate children and young people to become knowledgeable audiences of tomorrow. In 1988 groups of young children and college students were given tours of Aljira's exhibitions and viewed dance presentations in conjunction with our exhibition series. The recent relocation of the Gallery to the downtown business district of Newark, represents potentially a new business-oriented public of some 40,000 workers, students, and faculty. Aljira's intention is to continue to establish a strong network of programs that feeds into the business community, the wider gallery, college, museum and neighborhood audiences.

During FY 1986-87 Aljira focused on strengthening its artistic vision and solidifying its marketing plan. In 1987-88 Aljira was selected for inclusion in the New Jersey State Council on the Arts Minority Arts Stabilization Program. An outside consultant was assigned to evaluate the organization and to make recommendations. Aljira subsequently received salary assistance, allowing the organization to employ a part-time Director whose responsibility was to oversee the transition of Aljira from an all-volunteer organization to one with paid professional staff. Aljira continued to strengthen its management by developing a strong Board and establishing sound fiscal practices. In 1988 Aljira contracted with the Board Member Institute of New Jersey to train and develop its current Board which is directly responsible for making policy. Day-to-day operations and execution of that policy is the responsibility of the Executive Director, who is assisted by a full-time Artistic Director, public relations consultant, production and design consultant, and a part-time volunteer secretary.

The activities conducted in FY 1989 were a series of four exhibitions, DIARY OF A NEIGHBORHOOD, URBAN NARRATIVE, PRESENT CONDITIONS, DESIRE, and related performances and poetry readings. Aljira also held its First Annual Art Auction. The number of people involved with each activity were approximately 17 volunteers, a consultant, 3 curators, and 3 staff members.

Aljira successfully raised \$10,000 through its art auction. In addition, over \$5,000 was generated in memberships. Press coverage was received from the Newark Star Ledger and the New York Times, maintaining the visibility of the Center and reinforcing its value as a useful community resource. Aljira was one of sixteen alternative art spaces selected as an outstanding organization by Art in America Annual 1989-90.