



The Advocate

How philanthropist Sarah Arison is changing the conversation about arts patronage in America.

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Sarah Arison has just moved into her new Greenwich Village apartment. She apologizes for the absence of a coffee table and other furniture. Contemporary art takes precedence in the foyer, where "Untitled 2," by artist Zoe Buckman, hangs above Claude Lorraine's cast-bronze ginkgo chair.

This august but approachable aesthetic makes for an apt introduction to the 32-year-old philanthropist and independent film producer. Sitting cross-legged on an L-shaped sofa, Arison's sunny mien belies the steely focus and massive Rolodex that make her one of the country's leading patrons of the arts.

"Let's see," she says cheerfully, using her fingers to tick off the boards on which she sits, "New World Symphony, National Young Arts Foundation, Americans for the Arts, American Ballet Theater, MoMA PS1, and the Brooklyn Museum. I think that's everything."

Unlike most charity-circuit joiners, Arison is profoundly involved in each organization, donating not only significant funding, but endless hours of networking. "There are very few people Sarah's age who dedicate so much time, energy, and spirit to philanthropy,"

says prominent Manhattan arts patron Agnes Gund, who sits with Arison on the boards of MoMA PS1 and Young Arts. "She is the kind of dedicated and rare young leader that we want and need today."

Congeniality is an obvious attribute. Arison laughs liberally as we discuss her transformation from a self-described "science and math nerd" to president of the \$315 million Arison Arts Foundation, founded by her grandparents in 2005. In the 1980s, Arison's grandfather Ted Arison, founder of Carnival Cruises, created Miami's New World Symphony and the National Young Arts Foundation with his wife, Lin.

Though Arison had entered Emory University as an aspiring geneticist, her arts-focused summer travels with her grandmother convinced her to reconsider. "Out of nine grandchildren, no one was going to take over their work in the arts," Arison recalls. "So I went to my grandmother and said, 'I want to help.'"

At 19, Arison joined the boards of the Arison Arts Foundation and the National Young Arts Foundation. "I sat quiet at board meetings for years, just listening," she says. Wanting to keep her own identity, Ari-



son moved to Manhattan and worked in publishing, marketing, and film production before making philanthropy her full-time commitment in 2013. Asked how she juggles the agendas of six major arts organizations, Arison shrugs: "Everything I do ends up somehow tying into other organizations."

Among Arison's own collaborations: She chairs ABT's education committee, which brings ballet to underserved children through its Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis School, and is equally enthusiastic about the Brooklyn Museum's outreach to LGBT teenagers. Still, Young Arts remains her proudest accomplishment.

"I really do believe that we are all working for the same goal: greater support for artists," she says. "I don't believe in this siloed approach: 'These are my donors, these are my programs, these are my artists.' The arts world will be much stronger if people collaborate."

In 2017, Arison plans to break ground on a new campus for Young Arts alumni in Miami's Wynwood neighborhood, adding several blocks of studio space and other resources to the two buildings already housing gallery and office space. The goal, Arison says, is to help artists in the transition from college to the workforce. "It's not really been addressed for artists: You have your BFA or MFA, and you have loans, and where do you start? I see this as a place where artists can experiment and fail—where they can collaborate," Arison says.

To date, Arison says, Young Arts has been successful in identifying promising high school artists, providing master classes with such luminaries as Mikhail Baryshnikov and Robert Redford, and helping them earn scholarships to top colleges and universities. Out of 10,000 annual applications, Arison's organization selects only 170 finalists to come to Miami,

while 450 regional winners are given classes and are honored in New York, Los Angeles, and Miami.

Speaking shortly after the U.S. presidential election, Arison acknowledged that Donald Trump's policies will likely make her role as a philanthropist increasingly urgent. "We are at a very difficult time, particularly for the arts and artists. I think it's going to fall to the private sector to pick up the slack [from potential government defunding]," she says. "In my position, I probably should keep my mouth shut, because we always need funding from the government and donors, but I would be doing a disservice to sit quiet while I see the arts community truly terrified for their basic human rights." Clearly, we've hit on a touch point, and Arison continues to sound off. But her tone remains optimistic, because she believes political hurdles will function as positive cultural catalysts.

"It's an interesting time because artists are becoming agents for social change," she says. Arison is particularly inspired by visual artist Hank Willis Thomas, who started the first artist-run super-PAC, For Freedoms, in 2016, and by her friend, British artist Zoe Buckman, whose contemporary works spotlight women's rights. "Artists have the voice to take on these very difficult subjects," says Arison. "I think they should use their talents to raise awareness about the seriousness of what's going on."

