

National Convening on Art and Social Connection

March 19-20, 2026 | High Museum of Art, Atlanta

Convening Schedule

Thursday, March 19, 2026

9 a.m. Coffee and Registration

9:30 a.m. Welcome Remarks

10 a.m. Keynote Address: *We All Come From Where The Sky Comes From*
vanessa german, Visual artist, poet, and activist

Drawing on her experience as an artist and community-builder, German illuminates how creativity, tenderness, and collective imagination can spark meaningful social connection. She invites us to see the arts not just as expression, but as a practice that can counter isolation and cultivate belonging. By exploring this potential, German challenges us to imagine how creative practice might become a vital force for connection, care, and collective well-being.

11:15 a.m. Panel Discussion: How do loneliness and social isolation affect us?

Drawing on clinical practice, population-level research, and contemplative perspectives, panelists will examine how loneliness and social isolation affect individuals, communities, and our sense of meaning and belonging, illuminating the emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions of disconnection.

Panelists include:

- Kathy Bruss, PsyD, licensed clinical psychologist and former mental health lead in the Division of Population Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- Jan Willis, PhD, Professor Emerita of Religion, Wesleyan University
- Nadine Kaslow, PhD, ABPP, Professor and Vice Chair for Faculty Development, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory University School of Medicine

12:15 p.m. Lunch on Your Own

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- 1:45 p.m. Breakout Sessions
Interactive workshops, gallery experiences, and presentations facilitated by researchers, practitioners, artists, educators, and other speakers. Please see breakout session descriptions below.
- 4:15 p.m. Closing Remarks
- 4:45 p.m. Networking Reception and Optional Exhibition Tour
*Participants may join a tour of [The Lost World: The Art of Minnie Evans](#)
This guided tour is limited to 20 participants and available on a first-come, first-served basis

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9:45 a.m. Welcome Remarks

10 a.m. Keynote Address: *Art as Accelerant to Connection*
Anne Basting, PhD, Professor Emerita of English at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee

Building on the latest research and her thirty years as an artist and scholar, Basting opens up the art-experiencing process to understand just what might make it such a powerful accelerant to meaningful, social connection. And knowing this power, she challenges us to imagine the biggest possible dream for arts engagement as a social cure to our collective loneliness.

11:15 a.m. Case Studies: How can we work together across disciplines, sectors, and communities to advance our shared work?

These case studies present varied examples of cross-sector collaboration between arts organizations and partners in health, social services, and public policy. Speakers will share how these partnerships are built and sustained in practice, from aligning goals and language to sharing resources and coordinating efforts. Together, the examples demonstrate how interdisciplinary collaboration can expand access and support more responsive approaches to community engagement and social connection.

Speakers include:

- Lara Schweller, PhD, Associate Educator for Access Programs and Initiatives, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- Ricardo Beaird, Community Development Director, Springboard for the Arts, Minneapolis
- Callie Smith, PhD, Curator of Education and Public Programs, LSU Museum of Art, Baton Rouge

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Breakout Session Descriptions

*Note that all breakout sessions are offered twice, unless otherwise noted.

Thursday, March 19, 2026

Idea Exchange: Who's in the Room?

Facilitators: Select convening attendees, application-based

Location: Yellow Workshop

This interactive breakout invites conference attendees to share brief, focused snapshots of their work addressing social isolation or loneliness through the arts. Designed as a collective “roll call” of ideas, this session illuminates who is in the room, what knowledge and lived experience participants bring, and where unexpected connections might emerge. Participants are invited to offer a short presentation (up to 10 minutes) highlighting one specific aspect of a program, practice, or question they are exploring. Presentations follow a simple, shared structure to keep the session dynamic and accessible, allowing many voices to be heard in a short amount of time. The session functions as a generative mapping exercise—surfacing shared themes, complementary approaches, and potential collaborators—and serves as a launch point for deeper conversations, networking, and future partnerships throughout the conference.

Convening attendees are invited to submit an online proposal to be included in this session. The online form can be found [here](#), and closes March 2.

Beautiful Questions and Creative Care

Facilitator: Anne Basting, Professor Emerita of English at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee

Location: High Cafe

This breakout session draws on the principles of TimeSlips and the Beautiful Questions project to explore how imagination and inquiry can spark connection. Participants will engage in creative storytelling and question-based practices that invite collective meaning-making without requiring personal disclosure or prior knowledge. Through experiential activities and reflection, the session demonstrates how open-ended prompts and aesthetic engagement can foster empathy, presence, and relational exchange in the moment. Attendees will experience how these methods create inclusive spaces where every voice contributes to a shared story, while honoring ambiguity and multiple perspectives. The session offers practical tools and adaptable strategies for educators, artists, and healthcare and social service workers seeking to cultivate connection, curiosity, and community through creative practice. Please note that this session is offered once.

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Evaluating Art After Loss: Methods and Findings

Facilitators: Jennifer DuBose, Director, Georgia Health Policy Center, James Dills, Senior Research & Health Integration Associate, Georgia Health Policy Center, and High Museum of Art staff

Location: Hill Auditorium

This breakout session presents methods and findings from a recent program evaluation examining health and wellness outcomes for participants in Art After Loss, a bereavement-focused arts program at the High Museum of Art. Presenters will share the evaluation framework, data collection tools, and key indicators used to assess emotional well-being and social connection among participants experiencing grief. Findings will highlight participant-reported impacts, emergent themes, and practical insights into how arts-based programs can prompt connection to self, others, and the wider world. The session will also address challenges and limitations encountered in evaluating sensitive, relationship-centered programs, offering lessons learned and recommendations for others conducting similar work. Time will be reserved for discussion, inviting attendees to reflect on how these methods and findings might inform their own evaluation practices and program design.

Seeing with Spirit: Connecting Across Belief

Facilitators: Carlton Mackey, Assistant Director, Community Engagement and Dialogue, High Museum of Art, and Jan Willis, Professor Emerita of Religion at Wesleyan University, Connecticut

Location: Museum Galleries

This breakout session explores how art can serve as a bridge across spiritual beliefs and contemplative traditions through a modeling of the High Museum of Art's Seeing with Spirit program, followed by debrief and group discussion. Rather than prioritizing expertise or doctrine, Seeing with Spirit centers listening, curiosity, and presence. Participants are encouraged to reflect on how visual art resonates with their own spiritual or contemplative practices, while also learning from the diverse approaches of others in the room. By grounding dialogue in a shared aesthetic experience, the program fosters social connection across differences, creating a welcoming environment where multiple belief systems can coexist, intersect, and enrich one another.

Soft Community: Making Art Together to Spark Connection

Facilitator: Jaffia Royes, Teaching Artist, High Museum of Art

Location: Blue Workshop

Making art together can create a “soft community”—a temporary yet meaningful space where connection can emerge without pressure or permanence. This experiential, hands-on breakout session invites participants to engage in simple art making alongside others, guided by intentional prompts and structured conversation designed to deepen social connection in

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the moment. Through shared making, reflection, and facilitated dialogue, attendees will experience how thoughtfully framed activities can lower barriers, invite creative risk, and foster connection among strangers. Participants will leave with a set of adaptable art-making prompts and strategies they can use in their own programs to cultivate connection, presence, and a sense of belonging through collective creative practice.

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Creating Space for Shared Vulnerability

Facilitators: Loi Laing, Teaching Artist, High Museum of Art, and Sascha Demerjian, Co-Founder, The Grief House

Location: Blue Workshop

How do we create environments where people feel safe enough to be vulnerable and brave enough to connect across individual experiences of loss? Facilitators will reflect on their work creating spaces where grief, creativity, and connection intersect. Drawing from the Art After Loss program at the High and community-based grief programs at The Grief House, the speakers will share practical approaches for holding space, inviting personal storytelling, and fostering meaningful connection without forcing sameness or resolution. Together, they will explore how art, facilitation practices, and thoughtful program design can support participants in being seen, heard, and connected, both to themselves and to one another.

From Reflection to Action: Strengthening Art-Based Social Connection at Your Site

Facilitator: Andrew Westover, Eleanor McDonald Storza Deputy Director, Learning and Civic Engagement, High Museum of Art

Location: Yellow Workshop

This practical workshop invites participants to pause, reflect, and move forward with greater clarity in their work at the intersection of art and social connection. Attendees will engage in structured reflection activities, planning prompts, and facilitated peer conversations designed to surface insights from their current practice. Through individual and small-group exercises, participants will identify what is working, where challenges persist, and what next steps might meaningfully deepen connection and impact in their programs or organizations. Rather than presenting finished models, this session centers collective wisdom in the room, creating space to learn from one another and leave with concrete ideas, questions, and pathways forward. Participants will depart with renewed perspective, peer connections, and practical tools they can immediately apply to their work.

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Measuring Social Connection in Museums: Methods, Meaning, and Practice

Facilitators: Julia Forbes, Associate Director, Institutional Research, High Museum of Art, and Marcel Foster, CEO and Co-founder, Performance Hypothesis

Location: Hill Auditorium

How can arts organizations thoughtfully measure social connection—an experience that is deeply personal, relational, and often hard to quantify? Participants will explore and actively experience a range of qualitative and mixed-method approaches used to assess connection to self, to others, and to the wider world within a museum context. Through hands-on examples, reflective exercises, and discussion, the session will unpack the strengths and limitations of different methods, and how they can be adapted to varied audiences and programs. Attendees will leave with practical tools and questions to support more intentional and meaningful evaluation of social connection in their own institutional settings.

Fostering Connection in the Galleries: Teaching Strategies for Shared Experience

Facilitators: Daniel Mantilla, Coordinator, Arts Learning, High Museum of Art, Lara Schweller, Associate Educator, Access Programs and Initiatives, The Museum of Modern Art, and Callie Smith, Curator of Education and Public Programs, LSU Museum of Art

Location: Museum Galleries

How can in-gallery teaching practices move beyond information sharing to actively foster social connection? This breakout session explores a range of adaptable teaching strategies designed to cultivate connectivity—between people, artworks, and shared experience—within the gallery space. Through demonstrations, short activities, and reflective discussion, participants will experience approaches that invite dialogue, shared meaning-making, and attentiveness to one another. The session will highlight facilitation techniques that balance individual reflection with collective exchange, support multiple entry points, and respond to diverse social dynamics in the gallery. Attendees will leave with ready-to-use strategies and prompts that can be integrated into tours, programs, and informal gallery interactions to encourage deeper social connection and a greater sense of belonging.

Peer to Peer Exchange: Building What Comes Next

Facilitator: Laurel Humble, Associate Director, Lifelong Learning and Accessibility, High Museum of Art

Location: High Cafe

This facilitated breakout invites colleagues working across sites, states, and organizational contexts to shift from shared learning to collective action. Grounded in the relationships and ideas surfaced throughout the convening, the session focuses on how we sustain conversation, build momentum, and move forward together beyond this moment. Through

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guided reflection and small-group dialogue, participants will identify shared priorities, open questions, and opportunities for collaboration across geography and discipline. Together, the group will explore practical next steps—communication channels, peer learning structures, and possible joint initiatives—that can support ongoing exchange and coordinated action. Rather than producing a single plan, the session emphasizes alignment, accountability, and connection: clarifying what feels most urgent, who wants to stay connected around specific themes, and how this network can continue to grow, learn, and act together after the convening ends. Please note that this session is offered once