THE AJA PROJECT

Awarded California Arts Council Innovations + Intersections Grant
State grant supports arts-based strategies for community needs in wellness and technology sectors

San Diego, CA – The California Arts Council announced today an award for The AjA Project as part of its pilot grant program, Innovation + Intersections, aimed at providing groundbreaking approaches to address society’s most pressing issues and opportunities. The grant will serve as a resource for The AjA Project and its partners: PANA, United Women of East Africa, JCCS, and Tijuana Robotica.

The AjA Project is one of six funding recipients for the Innovations + Intersections program, designed to support creative strategies for urgent community needs crossing the technology and wellness sectors—two areas identified by the California Arts Council body as having the greatest potential for demonstrable impact and community value when connected with arts and culture. Projects were funded at the largest award amounts in the agency’s history, made possible by a one-time 2018 state funding increase. Awarded project designs consider the areas of artificial intelligence and digital literacy, Native and Indigenous community wellness, disability innovation, and wildfire management.

The Innovations + Intersections award will support The AjA Project’s new project that flips the script on the way algorithms have assigned risk to individuals based on racial identifiers. The project will showcase educational curriculum to be able to recognize and communicate the flaws and limitations of artificial intelligence. The purpose of this project is to have young people of color, who have been negatively impacted by racialized surveillance, to have the opportunity to train face detection software to recognize images of black and brown communities based on their joy and resilience, instead of biased criminogenic or stereotypical categories. The AjA Project will work with youth in our community to shift the power balance of who is designing AI software by teaching them how to tell stories in the language of machines and change the trajectory possibilities of how digital platforms see people of color.
"We need more than awareness in our communities of how mass surveillance, privacy laws, or artificial intelligence works. It is absolutely critical that the next generation, our youth, have fluency in the language of power expressed by these technologies that visually interpret our lives with far-reaching consequences."

- Aya Ibarra

Ibarra is The AjA Project Chair of our Board of Directors and the Director of Business Development at Descartes Labs, a tech platform designed to help businesses harness AI for geospatial analytics questions

“The Innovations + Intersections program stemmed from our desire as Council members to bring together the areas of technology and wellness in order to generate the greatest impact for our state’s communities. We wanted to allow California’s arts and cultural organizations the freedom to dream big and define those projects as they saw fit—to determine what was needed in their communities, and to imagine a new approach to best address those needs,” said California Arts Council Chair Nashormeh Lindo. “The bold thinking and groundbreaking ideas from these six awarded organizations are exceptional. We are honored to support their projects creatively taking on such relevant issues for our state."

View the California Arts Council’s full announcement for a complete listing of all Innovations + Intersections grantees and their projects.

The AjA Project is a compassionate space for young people, activists, visual artists and educators to engage critically with issues that affect our community and realize our collective liberation through participatory storytelling and the documentary arts.

For over 20 years, The AjA Project (pronounced Ahszah) has been a nationally recognized leader in using photography as a tool to transform the lives of youth. With a camera in their hands, youth discover a safe space in which they can critically examine themselves and their community through images. They can “speak” to the rest of the world through the lens, and tell their own story. Why does this matter? Youth that experience AjA programming demonstrate an increased confidence in communicating their own ideas, opinions, and experiences. They also begin to see themselves as agents of change, capable of advancing positive developments in their communities. This is crucial: youth with higher levels of self efficacy are more resilient, do better in
school, get involved in their community, and succeed in academic and professional settings. Photography makes this possible.

The **California Arts Council** is a state agency with a mission of strengthening arts, culture, and creative expression as the tools to cultivate a better California for all. It supports local arts infrastructure and programming statewide through grants, initiatives, and services. The California Arts Council envisions a California where all people flourish with universal access to and participation in the arts.

Members of the California Arts Council include: Chair Nashormeh Lindo, Vice Chair Jaime Galli, Larry Baza, Lilia Gonzales Chavez, Jodie Evans, Kathleen Gallegos, Stanlee Gatti, Donn K. Harris, Alex Israel, Consuelo Montoya, and Jonathan Moscone. Learn more at [www.arts.ca.gov](http://www.arts.ca.gov).

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