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[00:00:00] **Emma:** My name is Emma Grover, and I am the program and communications coordinator at the Oakland Asian Cultural Center, known also as OACC. Today we are sharing the eighth episode of our Let's Talk audio series. Let's talk as part of OACC's Open Ears for Change Initiative, which was established in 2020. With this series, our goals are to address anti-blackness in the APIA communities, discuss the effects of colorism and racism in a safe space, and highlight black and Asian solidarity and community efforts specifically in the Oakland Chinatown area.

[00:00:43] Today's guests are Elena Serrano and Suzanne Takahara, co-founders of Eastside Arts Alliance. Welcome Elena and Suzanne, thank you so much for joining today's episode. And so just to kick things off, wanna hear about how was Eastside Arts Alliance started?

[00:01:01] **Susanne:** Well, it was really Greg Morozumi who had a longstanding vision of creating a cultural center in East Oakland, raised in Oakland, an organizer in the Bay Area, LA, and then in New York City where he met Yuri Kochiyama, who became a lifelong mentor.

[00:01:17] Greg was planning with one of Yuri's daughters, Ichi Kochiyama to move her family to Oakland and help him open a cultural center here. I met Greg in the early nineties and got to know him during the January, 1993 "No Justice, No Peace" show at Pro Arts in Oakland. The first Bay Graffiti exhibition in the gallery. Greg organized what became a massive anti-police brutality graffiti installation created by the TDDK crew. Graffiti images and messages covered the walls and ceiling complete with police barricades. It was a response to the Rodney King protests. The power of street art busted indoors and blew apart the gallery with political messaging. After that, Greg recruited Mike Dream, Spy, and other TDK writers to help teach the free art classes for youth that Taller Sin Fronteras was running at the time.

[00:02:11] There were four artist groups that came together to start Eastside. Taller Sin Fronteras was an ad hoc group of printmakers and visual artists activists based in the East Bay. Their roots came out of the free community printmaking, actually poster making workshops that artists like Malaquias Montoya and David Bradford organized in Oakland in the early 70s and 80s.

[00:02:34] The Black Dot Collective of poets, writers, musicians, and visual artists started a popup version of the Black Dot Cafe. Marcel Diallo and Leticia

Utafalo were instrumental and leaders of this project. 10 12 were young digital artists and activists led by Favianna Rodriguez and Jesus Barraza in Oakland. TDK is an Oakland based graffiti crew that includes Dream, Spie, Krash, Mute, Done Amend, Pak and many others evolving over time and still holding it down.

[00:03:07] **Elena:** That is a good history there. And I just wanted to say that me coming in and meeting Greg and knowing all those groups and coming into this particular neighborhood, the San Antonio district of Oakland, the third world aspect of who we all were and what communities we were all representing and being in this geographic location where those communities were all residing. So this neighborhood, San Antonio and East Oakland is very third world, Black, Asian, Latinx, indigenous, and it's one of those neighborhoods, like many neighborhoods of color that has been disinvested in for years. But rich, super rich in culture.

[00:03:50] So the idea of a cultural center was...let's draw on where our strengths are and all of those groups, TDKT, Taller Sin Fronteras, Black artists, 10 - 12, these were all artists who were also very engaged in what was going on in the neighborhoods. So artists, organizers, activists, and how to use the arts as a way to lift up those stories tell them in different ways. Find some inspiration, ways to get out, ways to build solidarity between the groups, looking at our common struggles, our common victories, and building that strength in numbers.

[00:04:27] **Emma:** Thank you so much for sharing. Elena and Suzanne, what a rich and beautiful history for Eastside Arts Alliance.

[00:04:34] Were there any specific political and or artistic movements happening at that time that were integral to Eastside's start?

[00:04:41] **Elena:** You know, one of the movements that we took inspiration from, and this was not happening when Eastside got started, but for real was the Black Panther Party. So much so that the Panthers 10-point program was something that Greg xeroxed and made posters and put 'em up on the wall, showing how the 10-point program for the Panthers influenced that of the Young Lords and the Brown Berets and I Wor Kuen (IWK).

[00:05:07] So once again, it was that Third world solidarity. Looking at these different groups that were working towards similar things, it still hangs these four posters still hang in our cultural, in our theater space to show that we were all working on those same things. So even though we came in at the tail end of

those movements, when we started Eastside, it was very much our inspiration and what we strove to still address; all of those points are still relevant right now.

[00:05:36] **Susanne:** So that was a time of Fight The Power, Kaos One and Public Enemy setting. The tone for public art murals, graphics, posters. So that was kind of the context for which art was being made and protests happened.

[00:05:54] **Elena:** There was a lot that needed to be done and still needs to be done. You know what? What the other thing we were coming on the tail end of and still having massive repercussions was crack. And crack came into East Oakland really hard, devastated generations, communities, everything, you know, so the arts were a way for some folks to still feel power and feel strong and feel like they have agency in the world, especially hip hop and, spray can, and being out there and having a voice and having a say, it was really important, especially in neighborhoods where things had just been so messed up for so long.

[00:06:31] **Emma:** I would love to know also what were the community needs Eastside was created to address, you know, in this environment where there's so many community needs, what was Eastside really honing in on at this time?

[00:06:41] **Elena:** It's interesting telling our story because we end up having to tell so many other stories before us, so things like the, Black Arts movement and the Chicano Arts Movement. Examples of artists like Amiri Baraka, Malaguías Montoya, Sonya Sanchez. Artists who had committed themselves to the struggles of their people and linking those two works. So we always wanted to have that. So the young people that we would have come into the studio and wanna be rappers, you know, it's like, what is your responsibility?

[00:07:15] You have a microphone, you amplify. What are some of the things you're saying? So it was on us. To provide that education and that backstory and where they came from and the footsteps we felt like they were in and that they needed to keep **moving it forward. So a big part of the cultural center in the space are** the archives and all of that information and history and context.

[00:07:37] **Susanne:** And we started the Malcolm X Jazz Arts Festival for that same reason coming out of the Bandung Conference. And then the Tri Continental, all of this is solidarity between people's movements.

[00:07:51] **Emma:** You've already talked about this a little bit, the role of the arts in Eastside's foundation and the work that you're doing, and I'd love to hear

also maybe how the role of the arts continues to be important in the work that you're doing today as a cultural center.

[00:08:04] And so my next question to pose to you both is what is the role of the arts at Eastside?

[00:08:10] **Elena:** So a couple different things. One, I feel like, and I said a little bit of this before, but the arts can transmit messages so much more powerfully than other mediums. So if you see something acted out in a theater production or a song or a painting, you get that information transmitted in a different way.

[00:08:30] Then also this idea of the artists being able to tap into imagination and produce images and visions and dreams of the future. This kind of imagination I just recently read or heard because folks aren't reading anymore or hardly reading that they're losing their imagination. What happens when you cannot even imagine a way out of things?

[00:08:54] And then lastly, I just wanted to quote something that Favianna Rodriguez, one of our founders always says “cultural shift precedes political shift.” So if you're trying to shift things politically on any kind of policy, you know how much money goes to support the police or any of these issues. It's the cultural shift that needs to happen first. And that's where the cultural workers, the artists come in.

[00:09:22] **Susanne:** And another role of Eastside in supporting the arts to do just that is honoring the artists, providing a space where they can have affordable rehearsal space or space to create, or a place to come safely and just discuss things that's what we hope and have created for the Eastside Cultural Center and now the bookstore and the gallery. A place for them to see themselves and it's all um, LGBTQ, BIPOC artists that we serve and honor in our cultural center. To that end, we, in the last, I don't know, 8, 9 years, we've worked with Jose Navarrete and Debbie Kajiama of Naka Dance Theater to produce live arts and resistance, which gives a stage to emerging and experienced performance artists, mostly dancers, but also poets, writers, theater and actors and musicians.

[00:10:17] **Emma:** The last question I have for you both today is what is happening in the world that continues to call us to action as artists?

[00:10:27] **Elena:** Everything, everything is happening, you know, and I know things have always been happening, but it seems really particularly crazy right now on global issues to domestic issues. For a long time, Eastside was um,

really focusing in on police stuff and immigration stuff because it was a way to bring Black and brown communities together because they were the same kind of police state force, different ways.

[00:10:54] Now we have it so many different ways, you know, and strategies need to be developed. Radical imagination needs to be deployed. Everyone needs to be on hand. A big part of our success and our strength is organizations that are not artistic organizations but are organizing around particular issues globally, locally come into our space and the artists get that information. The community gets that information. It's shared information, and it gives us all a way, hopefully, to navigate our way out of it.

[00:11:29] **Susanne:** The Cultural Center provides a venue for political education for our communities and our artists on Palestine, Haiti, Sudan, immigrant rights, prison abolition, police abolition, sex trafficking, and houselessness among other things.

[00:11:46] **Elena:** I wanted to say too, a big part of what's going on is this idea of public disinvestment. So housing, no such thing as public housing, hardly anymore. Healthcare, education, we're trying to say access to cultural centers. We're calling that the cultural infrastructure of neighborhoods. All of that must be continued to be supported and we can't have everything be privatized and run by corporations. So that idea of these are essential things in a neighborhood, schools, libraries, cultural spaces, and you know, and to make sure cultural spaces gets on those lists.

[00:12:26] **Emma:** I hear you. And you know, I think every category you brought up, actually just now I can think of one headline or one piece of news recently that is really showing how critically these are being challenged, these basic rights and needs of the community. And so thank you again for the work that you're doing and keeping people informed as well. I think sometimes with all the news, both globally and, and in our more local communities in the Bay Area or in Oakland. It can be so hard to know what actions to take, what tools are available. But again, that's the importance of having space for this type of education, for this type of activism. And so I am so grateful that Eastside exists and is continuing to serve our community in this way.

What is Eastside Arts Alliance up to today? Are there any ways we can support your collective, your organization, what's coming up?

[00:13:18] **Elena:** Well, this is our 25th anniversary. So the thing that got us really started by demonstrating to the community what a cultural center was,

was the Malcolm X Jazz Arts Festival, and that this year will be our 25th anniversary festival happening on May 17th.

[00:13:34] It's always free. It's in San Antonio Park. It's an amazing day of organizing and art and music, multi-generational. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful day. Folks can find out. We have stuff going on every week. Every week at the cultural center on our website through our socials. Our website is Eastside Arts alliance.org, and all the socials are there and there's a lot of information from our archives that you can look up there. There's just great information on our website, and we also send out a newsletter.

[00:14:07] **Emma:** Thank you both so much for sharing, and I love you bringing this idea, but I hear a lot of arts and activism organizations using this term radical imagination and how it's so needed for bringing forth the future that we want for ourselves and our future generations.

[00:14:24] And so I just think that's so beautiful that Eastside creates that space, cultivates a space where that radical imagination can take place through the arts, but also through community connections. Thank you so much Elena and Suzanne for joining us today.

[00:14:40] **Susanne:** Thank you for having us.

[00:15:32] **Emma:** Let's Talk Audio series is one of OACC'S Open Ears for Change projects and is part of the Stop the Hate Initiative with funds provided by the California Department of Social Services. In consultation with the commission of Asian and Pacific Islander American Affairs to administer \$110 million allocated over three years to community organizations. These organizations provide direct services to victims of hate and their families, and offer prevention and intervention services to tackle hate in our communities.

This episode is a production of the Oakland Asian Cultural Center with engineering, editing, and sound design by Thick Skin Media. A special thanks to Jon Jang for permission to use his original music, and thank you for listening.

[00:16:34] **Music:** Life is not what you alone make it. Life is the input of everyone who touched your life and every experience that entered it. We are all part of one another. Don't become too narrow. Live fully, meet all kinds of people. You'll learn something from everyone. Follow what you feel in your heart.