In the arts and culture scene, a growing number of organizations and idea-starters must compete for finite resources — audience share, grant money and
philanthropic attention. Private fundraising is especially rough on arts groups during election season, when there’s less money to be had.

But one of Richmond’s greatest cultural advantages is that the barriers to entry are limited only by determination and creative strength. You don’t have to be powerful in the traditional sense to gain creative power.

You do it by illustrating creative vision, serving the community and sharpening your ability to adapt and thrive. The successful creative people tend to find easier access to power and the many forms it takes — not only money, but also board support, media attention and building a grass-roots audience or base.

Yes, perennial financial power remains within such supportive arts families as the Royalls, Markels and Weinsteins, and such philanthropic organizations as the Robins Foundation. But this year’s Power List looks through the prism of new energy — people who are breaking through by inspiring audiences, coralling resources and benefiting the community. In doing so, they raise their profiles and lift the city.

Momentum continues through big expectations for the new Institute for Contemporary Art, scheduled to open in fall 2017, with its striking modern design by renowned architect Steven Holl. The long-awaited Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia successfully opened at its new Leigh Street Armory location. The Virginia Historical Society surpassed its $38 million goal to transform its headquarters. And a new capital campaign launched to expand the American Civil War Museum by building into the surrounding hillside at Tredegar.

There also were power alliances. Arts organizations experimented with partnerships while finding new ways to diversify and reach audiences that better reflect the changing demographics of the city.

In turn, the power of the public shaped arts agendas. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts worked with 1708 Gallery to hold the popular In Light installation on museum grounds and featured two major shows of black artists, painter Kehinde Wiley and photographer Gordon Parks.

But diversity didn’t mean simply black and white: The Valentine museum’s new curator, Wanda Hernandez, is working to preserve local Latino art and history, with another project in the works to document early married gay couples and interracial relationships going back to Pocahontas.

In October, CultureWorks is pulling together more than 300 local arts groups for a monthlong series of events called Artober, which will feature a forum with mayoral
candidates to examine how they’ll engage with the arts.

In the corporate community, younger generations are stepping into leadership positions. TowneBank continues to establish itself as a major player in sponsorships across town, including the Valentine and Virginia Repertory Theatre — the area’s largest such organization, has a new director, Nathaniel Shaw.

“It’s not always about giving money, it’s about leadership,” says Bill Martin, director of the Valentine. “It makes a huge difference to have highly motivated and qualified board members, and Altria, Dominion and to a certain extent Capital One, have people involved on many boards.”

Public art dollars continue to stir debate around the power of how and where money is spent — as neighbors came out strongly in favor of a Maggie Walker statue staying in the Jackson Ward area where the legendary black banker lived.

Public art coordinator Ellyn Parker is working behind the scenes to update the city’s public art master plan, which includes making the process more transparent. Public art is funded through 1 percent from any capital improvement project that costs more than $250,000, and Parker is pushing to shift that money to a general fund, outside the current designation based largely on location, which could affect many neighborhoods — as it did in with the Maggie Walker memorial, which was funded because of the new city jail.

Richmond re-branded itself as a city for creatives. But that must reflect reality, and having high-profile examples help. In music, 21-year-old talent Lucy Dacus inspired musicians nationally and had critics drooling trying to find new ways to describe her voice. Writer and teacher Patrick Dacey’s debut short story collection was nominated for the prestigious Story Prize. And acclaimed Church Hill filmmaker Rick Alverson signed with United Talent Agency, had a retrospective of his films in Argentina, and has a new project scheduled for a midwinter shoot.

In the visual arts, a major presence retired this year with Joe Seipel, former dean of Virginia Commonwealth University’s art school. He’s going back to making art. There’s an interim director for now, but his successor should have a powerful voice in shaping the city’s premier public arts institution. The Richmond Mural Project, headed by Anthony Harris with RVA Magazine, and Shane Pamajambo, finished its main goal of 100 murals in five years, adding Richmond to a select list of world-class mural cities.

“As for creative energy, I think Richmond is as good as it’s ever been,” says John Pollard of ADA Gallery, who’s spearheading a fall art fair in Scott’s Addition featuring seven local galleries. “I think we’re being used a bit by the real estate market, but that’s always been the case.”
As for the pace of change, Pollard says: “Personally, I fear some of the rush to make us an art town, because we already were one, and have been for a long time. It needs to stay truthful and honest and real.”

1. Lisa Freiman

Director, VCU’s Institute for Contemporary Art

After a major capital campaign, the founding director of the institute has been making inroads in Richmond for three years, building a prominent staff and dropping hints at how it will operate within the local community. The ICA has the potential, through its collaborations with the city and Virginia Commonwealth University, to become one of the premiere venues for contemporary art in the country while raising the area’s reputation in the art world. Already, Freiman has brought Lauren Ross on board, former curator of the popular High Line park in Manhattan. They’re tightlipped about the pending exhibition schedule, but public energy and enthusiasm is on their side with a community ready and willing for a steady diet of work that’s challenging, new and different. Freiman will be leading
the charge behind the all-important launch of this home for contemporary exhibits that will educate and instill passion in future generations.

2. Tasha Chambers

Director, Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia

Chambers’ vision for Richmond’s only black history museum is simple: art, artifacts and activism. She sees it as her duty to educate and inspire the next generation of leadership who can affect the future. She deserves a medal for pulling off the major renovation, which saw the museum moving into the new Leigh Street Armory. Board chairwoman Marilyn West says she wore many hats. “She is energetic, exudes passion and was able to do much without pause during a pregnancy that has resulted in the birth of a beautiful baby girl, Imani.” The center’s permanent exhibition, “In Pursuit of Freedom, Justice and Equality,” spans emancipation to the civil rights era. It plans to include oral histories of those who fought Jim Crow. And
the center is opening an exhibition of black artist, writer and major collagist: “Romare Bearden: Vision and Activism” on Sept. 13. “It has been my experience that exposure to history and the arts leads to open and effective discourse,” Chambers says. “Especially in historically disenfranchised communities.”

3. Marlene Paul
Executive director, Art 180

Art 180 scored big this year with a community innovation grant of $500,000 from the Robins Foundation. The main reason was the vision of its Performing Statistics pilot program, which sought to use art and advocacy to reform the juvenile justice system. Leading the way, Paul works with such program visionaries as Mark Strandquist, who now lives in Philadelphia, to establish the ongoing funded program, Youth Self-Advocacy Through Art. It’s focused on incarcerated youth telling their stories through art. The money will be spread over three years and is specifically for that program. Art 180 has hired two part-time staff and is collaborating with the Legal Aid Justice Center, a statewide advocacy group, which takes the project to a different level. “I think it helps people understand that art can be used for a greater purpose,” Paul says. “Art is a catalyst for social change and can have a permanent effect, because we’re looking to change policy.”

4. David Fisk
Executive director, Richmond Symphony

The big challenge facing all symphonic groups is how to bring new fans and younger generations into the fold. The venerable Richmond Symphony had a banner year because of the creative energy behind its new big tent. The mobile stage allows the symphony to take classical music to the masses in such nontraditional locations as Chimborazo and Abner Clay parks, Brown’s Island and Crump Park in Henrico. Fisk also oversaw several other new series, Dominion Casual Fridays, the relocation of the Rush Hour Series to Hardywood Park Craft Brewery and concerts that expanded the definition of symphonic music, such as the Video Games Live concert. The two city festivals raised more than $115,000 for local schools and nonprofits, which can be used to buy instruments to create orchestra music programs in East End public schools.

5. Ashley Hawkins
Executive director, Studio Two Three

Nashville has Hatch Show Print’s famous gallery, and Richmond has Studio Two
Three. It's become the go-to spot for local collaboration for printing needs as well as a premier artist workspace. Because of Hawkins, who oversaw its expansion, the building is home to more than 60 artists with round-the-clock access in addition to hundreds more who use it part-time. It provides exhibition space and classes to more than 5,000 students a year. Creative, ambitious and always hands-on, Hawkins was a key player in pulling together the RVA Street Art Festival in April, which transformed the Manchester neighborhood. Hawkins and board chairwoman Alyssa Salomon also are raising their profile and that of local artists by launching S23 To-Go, a mobile printmaking and photography studio combined with a retail store. “S23 To-Go brings our educational programs, swag and print events to the public on a consistent, sustainable basis,” Hawkins says. “Plus, it'll look like an ice cream truck, which is just fun.”

6. Andy Edmunds

Director, Virginia Film Office

Edmunds is still pushing hard for local film projects, scoring an unexpected win with a fourth, though final, season renewal for “Turn: Washington's Spies” on AMC, which the film office says will mean another $55 million economic impact for the local economy plus 80 commercials promoting Virginia tourism produced at the show's expense. Edmunds serves not only as Richmond liaison to Hollywood, but also must educate a public and find creative ways to offset negative publicity that goes along with providing tax breaks to millionaires — as most film cities do. He'll soon watch the opening of the motion picture “Loving” by Jeff Nichols, which he says contains “performances for the ages. ... The original injustice occurred here, but a redemption is present in the universal support for the making of this special movie where it all happened.” He also helped bring the recent comedy film “Permanent” to town, starring Rainn Wilson and Patricia Arquette. It's set in the '80s — “finally a movie here with perms and mullets instead of wigs.”

7. Ryan Ripperton

Executive director, SPARC

The School of the Performing Arts in the Richmond Community has a track record of success training young people to sing, act, dance and explore the creative world of the stage. And big-name graduates such as Jason Mraz continue to give back. This summer, Ripperton completed his term as chairman of the resident company association of Dominion Arts Center, where he helped local companies afford and navigate the sought-after rental spaces, which is probably good because he's plenty busy at his day job. He oversaw a major SPARC renovation that tripled the amount
of instructional space, providing more students with financial aid than ever before. His annual operating budget doubled to $1.8 million, he completed a $6 million capital campaign to expand outreach programs and purchase and renovate the school's building, and he's been promoting the feature documentary "From the Wings," about the popular Live Art program, which aired nationally on Public Broadcasting Service stations. He has the 35th anniversary of the school in October.

8. Deejay Gray and Annie Colpitts

Artistic director and managing director, TheatreLab

Since striking out on its own in January 2013 from a Firehouse Theatre incubation, Richmond's young, provocative theater company has earned awards and critical acclaim for producing unique and challenging work, mostly contemporary plays. Gray and Colpitts, the driving forces behind TheatreLab, showed how persistence,
collaborations and making some noise could help them gain ground in an established theater scene. At their creative hub and performance space known as the Basement, they recently ended a fascinating season that included “Mr. Burns,” “Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar and Grill,” “Bad Jews” and “Venus in Furs.” But it isn’t only the shows: They assist other theaters, providing a space for artists to create, and offer a new Cellar Series that aims to provide an outlet for aspiring young performers.

9. Lucy Dacus

Musician

Maggie Walker Governor’s School graduate Lucy Dacus released her debut album, “No Burden,” on a little-known Richmond record label, EggHunt, which isn’t that little-known anymore. Since then, the 21-year-old has racked up stellar national reviews, signed with the well-established label Matador Records as well as booked major club dates around the world. She’s also been an insightful and outspoken interview subject — discussing what it’s like as a young artist to have a bidding war over your music in a new Pitchfork session, for example. Her success showed numerous local musicians and others that you can launch your career in Richmond and still get noticed.
10. Sarah Eckhardt

Associate curator of modern and contemporary art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Though she's been at the museum since 2011, Eckhardt was especially active this year. She was a big proponent in working closely with Emily Smith at 1708 Gallery to expand the popular InLight Richmond installation to two days and hold it at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. She also was a major catalyst in the museum’s diversification efforts, working with other curators to make popular major exhibits such as Kehinde Wiley and Gordon Parks come alive for Richmond audiences. She'll be working with former curator John Ravenal on his highly anticipated show, exploring the connection between the work of Jasper Johns and Edvard Munch in November — it's a thoughtful show that could hold special appeal for art historians and critics, adding credibility for the museum. But Eckhardt's real passion is photography, so you can look for the museum’s holdings to continue to improve in that area — not to mention its outreach and innovative programs that have been transforming the entire vibe of the place to one that's integral to the communities it serves.