

I *This chapter describes the insights and learning produced by a group of community activists and educators who participated in cooperative inquiry into the question, How and when does art release, create, and sustain transforming power for social change?*

Can the Arts Change the World? The Transformative Power of Community Arts

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Can the arts change the world? A group of organizers gathered in cooperative inquiry over the course of eighteen months in 2004 and 2005 to think about this question and answered yes, the arts can indeed contribute to changing the world.

The Inquiry Group

We were seasoned community arts activists who, for more than twenty years, had woven together new understandings of the world and its possibilities. We had experience working with people in an economically impoverished neighborhood of Philadelphia (Lily Yeh), in Chicago public schools (Arnie Aprill), and among neighbors of diverse backgrounds in Los Angeles (Nobuko Miyamoto). Joining them were “regular” organizers: the director of a Christian development corporation on Chicago’s Southwest side (Richard Townsell), a woman active in a Seattle center for abused deaf women (Elise Holliday), the head of a San Diego union (Fahari Jeffers), an outspoken organizer of moms on welfare who defend their right to go to college (Diana Spatz), and I (at the time a media organizer in New York of immigrant, African American, and other ethnic newspapers).

The Dialogue in the Inquiry

Brought together by the Ford Foundation-funded Leadership for a Changing World Program, we had the chance to think about our work through “cooperative inquiries” organized by New York University’s Center for Leadership in Action. Through site visits and six face-to-face meetings, we saw the power of artists collaborating with the wider community to create a new sense of possibility. Yes, our neighborhoods were impoverished by an economy more and more organized to suit big companies and the wealthiest among us. Yes, our government waged wars seemingly beyond our control. Yes, our communities were torn apart by distrust.

Still, we know we are not without imagination and resources. In small worlds across the country, community artists managed to weave new understandings and trust, making possible further action to take on what feels like overwhelming forces of hate. Community arts can be disarming, giving you a novel angle of vision and eliciting the power of your emotions and intellect at the same time. They can help make people reflective and open to change. They can create new understandings of ourselves that push ethnic boundaries.

Lily captured this process: “We take where it’s broken and begin to work on it by planting seeds which are inspired ideas. Turn the deficit in a neighborhood and make it work for you.”

Lily herself was an art professor who eventually left her job to work full-time in north Philadelphia. Together with community residents, she took abandoned, rubble-strewn lots and did not accept that they must be ugly. Starting with the children, she inspired the community with the idea that things could be different. The Village of Arts and Humanities emerged, acres of abandoned lots became sculpture gardens, and buildings became the home of murals four stories high. The village created a children’s theater that tours the world, and it eventually stepped into community work that was not art-related, such as creating new housing and supporting business people in their own economic development efforts.

Nobuko, a dancer and singer leading the arts organization Great Leap in Los Angeles, brought together Mexican Americans, Japanese immigrants, Muslims, and others to tell their families’ stories of migration to the United States, building common ground and enlarging the boundaries of what they felt to be their communities.

She also worked with me in Brooklyn for a woman’s dialogue project, where we brought together Muslim and Jewish women, Latinas, and a woman from Trinidad-Tobago, all of us overwhelmed by our organizing—working on such issues as domestic violence in Arab American and Pakistani American communities, redevelopment without creating gentrification in Brooklyn, leading a school, and creating interfaith challenges to the government’s repression of Muslim Americans after September 11, 2001. Her healing circles with storytelling and body movement made us aware of

both how separated we were from one another and how much we neglect ourselves in our rush to nurture our families and neighbors.

“The arts open boundaries among cultures,” Nobuko said, “but also among disciplines, generations, and faiths.” Nobuko’s cultural work rests on her insight that we all have to grow and change for the world that is coming. “The balance of majority and minority is going to shift,” says Nobuko. “So we need to be able to create community between cultures—creating something new out of the ways that we are not the same.” We need to “connect people and build interrelationships among our creative fires and imaginations outward through race, class, and gender to create real communication.” At the heart of her project is a sense of urgency in creating respectful and new communities across our differences.

Arnie collaborated with Richard in his Chicago neighborhood of Lawndale to undercut the power of policy experts in a meeting launching a community planning process. Rather than running the meeting and setting the agenda, as they had expected, the policy experts ended up joining hundreds of community people in cutting out visual representations of their vision for the neighborhood. Then they saw their paper cutout pasted on the wall with those from the rest of the community to create a big picture of where folks wanted the neighborhood to go. It’s not easy amplifying neighbors’ voices over those of the experts, but Arnie and Richard managed it (see Chapter Five in this volume).

Those of us who are not artists were intrigued by the power of the community artists among us. By way of discussion, the artists saw their work anew through the eyes of the rest of us. Together we realized that all organizing is a creative act. All of us were stitching together communities fragmented by distrust, economic trials, ethnocentrism, and the silencing of our own knowledge by the overwhelming power of the media and what used to be called “the system.” We fashion a new reality in what we create together.

As Richard said: “I had thought of the arts as a product—a mural, a mosaic, sculptures, or pictures. I now saw the arts as a way of thinking and making meaning in community.”

Insights from the Inquiry

We came up with insights to share with other organizers. I wrote up our findings and offer a brief version for you here.¹

Community Arts Create Safe Space. Community arts can create a safe space that allows us to trust and be open to change. We saw this in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, where Nobuko, a dancer and performer, brought together people from many backgrounds—Muslims, Buddhists, Arab and Jewish Americans, Chicanos, Dominicans, Japanese, and Japanese Americans. Through moving together and telling stories, they built trust and common ground. Through an arts exercise conducted with Arnie, Richard created

another safe space in Lawndale. It allowed the “old heads” to step out of the way so the younger folks could take the lead, confident that the young ones had listened to the knowledge they would transmit.

Through the Arts, We Create Something New. The arts create a multiplicity of views that can offer many entry points for conversation and change. In the arts, we are each in our own way engaged in a battle against homogenization, struggling to build a new sense of ourselves, a sense of possibility, and a way of seeing outside of the ordinary. We start new conversations that cross beyond the boundaries of the commonplace and leave behind the platitudes created by the interests of the powerful. We are no longer consumers of culture, but its creators.

With Art, We Can Slow Down and Reflect. Art can serve as a speed bump, slowing us down to reflect. The process of creation—including writing and telling our stories—can help us slow down and reflect together, rather than talk past each other. Organizers sometimes jump ahead with their agenda before witnessing what is happening in a community. By slowing down, we unearth what is waiting to be spoken, and we clarify our core vision and purpose. This can help us hold to our true mission, whatever that might be.

Art Communicates and Envisions. Surrounding ourselves with beauty communicates that we are important and mean something in the world, while offering a vision of what we are working for. Lily brought her idea of “beauty is a right” to north Philly, just as Abused Deaf Women’s Advocacy Services (ADWAS) instinctively did when beautifully decorating its Seattle office for abused, deaf women. Instead of communicating “This is a worthless neighborhood,” Lily’s art parks communicated “This is a place of meditation, beauty, and joy.” Diana echoed Lily but was a bit pithier: “You think you don’t deserve as much because you have a crummy school in a crummy neighborhood. You feel more worthy when you are surrounded by beauty.”

Art Records the Past and Points to the Future. Art can honor our past by creating a record of what we have done, thus anchoring us for our move into the future. By reestablishing context, whether by naming our history, telling our stories, or making the community visible, we ground ourselves against the emptiness offered to us by mainstream culture. This is part of slowing down. It then allows us to distance ourselves from what is going on, so that we can make new things visible and recontextualize and analyze them. (This reminded me of the power of independent media, or at least its aspirations.)

Art Heals and Sustains. The process of creating together can heal and sustain us for the long haul. We realized that in this difficult political moment we needed to sustain our work by creating a healing culture within our organizations and movements that is compassionate to ourselves and others. Activists need some healing right now, and some of this may be done

through the arts. We saw it especially in Nobuko's work. In Brooklyn, she and Abby brought together women leaders—Ecuadorian, Dominican, Caribbean, Arab, Jewish, and Japanese—into a healing space. By having the women tell their stories (sometimes in movement, by acting them out) and listen to each other with respect, she helped the hard-working organizers refresh themselves and open themselves to the struggles of one another and their communities.

Arts Engage in Community Transformation. The arts can make us comfortable with the role shifting that is part of community transformation. A Buddhist priest became a performing artist in Nobuko's Los Angeles creation. Big Man, a drug dealer and one of the leaders of the Village of Arts and Humanities, slowly left his old life behind and became a sculptor in Lily's north Philadelphia neighborhood. We need in some ways to become new people in any new world we hope to create, and the arts can help us work that out.

Art Brings Spiritual Practice to Harsh Reality. Through the arts, we can deal with harsh realities and transform them through the act of creation as a spiritual practice. Here, Lily and Nobuko both emphasized the importance of quality. Beautiful creation—not defined by museums or concert halls but rooted in “the heartbeat of the community”—lifts our spirits. Sophisticated expertise in dialog with the community can create this art.

Art Can Be a Disarming Process for Change. We also noticed that the arts can be disarming. Lily and her allies did a lot of their artwork and community development activities under the radar. This was not development driven by the vision of city planners. They created not a frontal attack but a subtler lateral move that did its job before the people in power noticed. A group that comes together around a mural can do other things: clean up a corner, register voters, exert pressure on elected officials, and redirect resources.

Don't Target Our Children—The Power of the Artistic Expression

Sometimes a frontal attack has a huge impact. We saw that in the Don't Target Our Children campaign, devised by Diana Spatz and her team at Low-Income Families' Empowerment Through Education (LIFETIME). LIFETIME members are moms who are struggling to raise their family, go to college, and defend public assistance programs, all at the same time. Diana sees her role as empowering women who are flattened by economic and family burdens to stand up and say, “We deserve better.” It is a challenge, she says, not least because “in the midst of taking care of kids, you lose sight of the big picture.”

One of the most empowering exercises for the moms came out of a simple task: “Draw a picture of what your education means to you.” Diana

showed that even those of us not working in the arts can draw on it in our organizing. “It made people really think,” she said. By drawing a picture, the moms couldn’t use the same old words that often come to mind. “Having rituals and a focus on the arts in all our gatherings expands our thinking,” Diana says. Seeing ourselves and our realities in new ways is a key to change.

The Don’t Target Our Children campaign brought the artistic creations of the members to the public in a successful effort to stop welfare cuts. To prepare for a visit to the California state capitol in January 2004, the moms painted political messages on 150 T-shirts, to neutralize the negative images the well-off legislators and reporters have of poor families with new images of strength and moxie. A child from Camptonville, in northern Sierra County, admonished Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger with a small shirt that read, “Kindergarten Cop, I thought you cared about us!” On another, a mom had painted the backside of a baby with a bulls-eye in the middle of its diaper and the message, “Don’t target our kids!” After taking over the governor’s office, the moms won statewide media attention for messages such as this one from six-year-old Michaela Howerton of Oakland: “My back is too small to balance the state budget!”

Their creativity won the cause coverage in broadcast media and at least seven newspapers across the state, including the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*, which featured a photograph of the action with the caption, “Laundry List of Complaints.” The event was also covered by the *Sacramento Bee*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Contra Costa Times*, the *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, and *Sing Tao*.

Ultimately, the Don’t Target Our Children campaign not only successfully blocked welfare cuts to children and families (and won the first cost of living increase since 1989) but also forced the media to see these mothers and their children as real people with value, helping change the political dynamic in the state. Through their art, the women and children transformed some ingrained cultural images that have a real impact on politics. They made visible the real context of welfare cuts: the pain they would cause to their families. Their art and agitation brought the accepted policies into question, opening up a space that allows other modes of expression, including moral questions, into a policy discourse that almost seems designed to shut them out. This opens up new avenues for popular power to express itself, even for those not versed in policyspeak.

Challenges and Limitations

Art builds on small successes. This is the organizers’ mantra: come up with a small, doable solution—such as getting the city to install a speed bump that slows down fast drivers in a neighborhood—and then bigger victories seem possible. The same is true with art. You can’t really fail at making art.

By succeeding at creating something when job programs or economic development projects have failed in the past, you can build confidence, trust, and hope to take further risks and try other ways of changing your environment. You develop a sense of your own creative power and what it is possible to accomplish together. You are no longer a spectator on the world, but bringing your own expression and experience to it.

Yet we were all aware that our successes could also remain limited in scope. Our work could create big vision but small results, given the organizational obstacles we face today. We also recognized that people too often feel that their voices remain small and frail. We asked, “How do you nurture this voice outside the system? How do you maintain it coherently? Can a community express a sense of discrete identity, not just in relation to the mainstream?” It is a challenge to sustain the insights that emerged in creative arts organizing if we don’t build institutions and locations where people can continue to act on them.

We brainstormed a list of obstacles that prevent the creative arts from being transformative. Here is what we found:

- *The class divide.* Richard reminded us of one of Saul Alinsky’s insights (1989): you have to align the poor with the middle class, or the middle class will move to the right. Through the arts, it is harder to bridge the class divide than the cultural or ethnic ones Nobuko, Lily, and I have dealt with.
- *Funders’ pace and cronyism.* “Our work is *our* work; it is not the funder’s work.” Program officers can be overly directive, or quickly move on to support other projects, creating a roller coaster for innovators. Or they find it easier to just keep giving money out to big institutions, which often don’t have the capacity to work at the grassroots where the community arts are most fertile.
- *Older leaders don’t give up control.* Outdated ideas can smother innovation, especially when they’re held by leaders of a previous generation who control funding and other levers of power. This is a problem in every area of organizing, but also in the community arts.
- *The arts are seen as politically irrelevant.* More research and documentation of the impact of community arts in organizing can help reverse this idea.
- *Artists’ egos.* Artists may begin to think that only they can be creative in a community. This is another version of the Expert Running Wild, and it is particularly treacherous while attempting cross-cultural work. Ideas of how to involve people are culturally specific. Artists cannot assume people buy in to their approach.
- *The arts are seen as risky or politically threatening.* The artist stereotype can work in artists’ favor: they are into play and experimentation. But when working in partnership with a more traditional organizer, the organizer may pull back as play gets uncomfortable or challenges

preconceived ideas or institutional power. It is, after all, a risk to open up your organization to the unknown—not just to unknown ideas but to unknown people.

- *The arts can be another form of mystification.* You can create an illusion of positive change in a violent and impoverished neighborhood by painting a nice mural. Or it can impose other people's values on a neighborhood, privileging some people and denying the reality of people's lives.
- *The transformative power of the arts too often stays at an individual level.* So individual people may become more open, expressive, and so on, but does that always help create a collective difference in the world? Well, no. But nothing is perfect.

Arnie also had some insights that were particular to the tension between established arts organizations (such as museums) and community organizing. Museums do outreach to try to bring new audiences in. Yet, he said, "The outreach model is a scarcity model, in which art assumes its value in direct proportion to its exclusiveness, placing arts organizations in the awkward position of struggling to connect to those it has excluded. This one-directional process tends to exacerbate ethnocentric assumptions about the cultures and capacities of the communities being 'out-reached.'"²

Conclusion

Our cooperative inquiry inspired us to see new ways out of the dead space that organizing for justice often falls into. Although our insights felt fresh to us, we also know we are part of a long tradition. The community arts movement seems to reemerge any time there is a movement for social change: in the settlement houses of the 1890s and 1910s, among workers in the 1930s, during the 1960s and 1970s (this last an era that Lily, Arnie, and Nobuko all emerged from and contributed to).

The example of the Highlander Center in Tennessee reminds us that new consciousness not linked to activity is just verbiage, and also that activity can help create new consciousness. That sounds a little like Marx: "One makes the world aware of its consciousness, one awakens the world out of its own dream, that one explains to the world its own acts" (Marx, 1967, p. 214). The creativity of arts rooted in community is one route to the new consciousness that is so vital to social change movements.

Changes in identity, enlarging your sense of common humanity with those who are different, and feeling more powerful both as an individual and as part of a group are all deep transformations. By weaving together new understandings in a creative process that has no monetary value, we can support a sensibility that goes beyond the market values dominating our culture. We can create an alternative to the harshness of contemporary political discourse that is so alienating to people. Too often, people working for

social justice marshal facts but offer no spirit. We might shy away from facing ambiguity or from aspiring to the unifying moral vision of a Martin Luther King, Jr. By opening up a space through art—familiar to us from childhood but giving us a new angle of vision as adults—we may also be embracing a different ethic of listening and understanding someone with whom we disagree.

Myles Horton of the Highlander Center was only one person who taught us of the resonance of the arts and social change in the tradition of popular education. He and his wife always drew on local music in their organizing work in the middle of Appalachia. This validated the culture of the residents and showed there is wisdom in everyday knowledge. It helps build relationships of trust and solidarity so that people can learn to question, remake their thinking, and then fight to change the relationships that are dehumanizing them. In *The Long Haul*, Horton's masterful autobiography (1990), we learned to take the tools we have and the culture we know and find a common expression to unify people's consciousness for action and change. On another continent but in a similar way, Paulo Freire (1985) touched on these same themes during the period of decolonization in Latin America.

We live in a media culture. We are in a battle of ideas—and values—and the arts help create and bring life to ideas, making values visible. As Arnie Aprill said, "Organizing, at its best, is also a creative act, a spiritual art."

If we, as organizers, are to join the battle, we need to pay more attention to the creative aspect of organizing, and to allow community arts activism to transform all of our social justice organizing.

Notes

1. The complete report was published by NYU's Research Center for Leadership in Action as Arnold Aprill and others, "Can the Arts Change the World? The Transformative Power of the Arts in Fostering and Sustaining Social Change" (2006). The cooperative inquiry process was led by Lyle Yorks and Sandra Hayes.

2. Our report includes more reflections on museums, based on our visit to the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle. Its exhibits are created by community members; for instance, Japanese Americans interned during World War II recreated the inside of one of the huts they lived in.

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