



Shaman at the Gates: The Potential Power of Arts in Community

William Cleveland

I'm going to begin my talk with an apology. I have really been busy. I mean really busy. So busy that everything I'm doing is beginning to overlap. This is happening right here as we speak. This morning even though I'm supposed to be delivering a short talk, there is this other thing on my list, which is a bunch of grants that have to be reviewed before I can do my speech. So I need your help to get caught up. Are you game?

We have before us six preliminary proposals, a cross-section of our changing arts community. Our job is to decide whether to provide planning money for the further development of these proposals for cultural mediation projects. Since this is a big group, we are going to conduct this panel kind of like the Roman forum. So after I briefly describe each proposal I will call for your Yes or No.

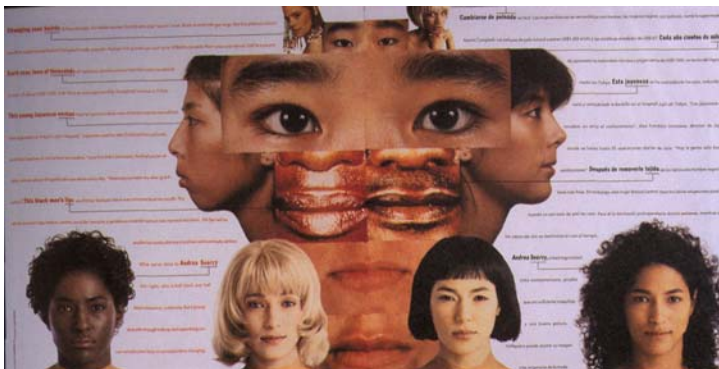
Proposal Summaries

1. Artist Saves Small Town

The first request comes from a small rural farm town of 5,000 in economic decline. Lately some of the town's citizens have been taking out their resentments about its problems on each other. Community interaction has deteriorated into name-calling, finger-pointing, scapegoating, even violence. Everybody says it's awful but no one can agree on a solution. So a town committee wants to hire a muralist to work with the town for six months to help the community feel better about itself and reconcile the warring factions.



2. Artist Heals School/Community



The next proposal comes from educators and social scientists from a big-city school district that has gone from 15% to 65% students of colour in the last ten years. Unfortunately, racism, fear and stereotyping have dramatically increased too. This group has written a study on the causes and effects of these problems and wants to apply their findings. The applicants are asking for funding to hire an artist

or arts organization to help them figure out a new way to speak to the community about their research.

3. Art Changes Law/Saves the Kids

Our next proposal is from a collaboration of 30 teen artists and their adult mentors who are very worried about the impact of psychological abuse on children in the home. They have studied up on the subject and think new legislation is needed to add psychological abuse to the child protection laws. They want to propose a new law to the Parliament as a theatre piece that will be performed there next session. After that, they want to start a company that will make TV shows and CDs that address youth issues.



4. Art Cures Nasty Habits



It seems that over the years, the CIA has put a lot of effort into teaching some military folks in Central and South America some interesting ways to get people to tell their stories. Some people in the US Congress want this changed. This is a joint request from a local college and a theatre company. They want support for collaboration with the State Department to create a theatre-based institute that would help some of these truth-squad guys eliminate their nasty habits.

5. Warden as Impresario

This one comes from a warden at a maximum-security prison with 10,000 inmates. The warden is proposing a concert and lecture series at the prison for inmates and staff that would include the Kronos String Quartet, B. B. King, Carlos Fuentes, Gil Scott-Heron, Jonathan Borofsky and an inmate production of *Waiting for Godot* developed in partnership with the Royal Swedish Theatre. She thinks this will eventually lead to the incorporation of college-level arts programs in all of our prisons. This, she says, will produce safer prisons, less costly incarceration and reduced recidivism.



6. Artist Rousts Crackheads!



Here is a proposal from a desperate inner-city neighbourhood where a small group of citizens has been trying to get rid of a crack house. Prior to the submission of this proposal, these community members engaged law enforcement; the city's zoning officials and their representative at city hall, all to no avail. They would like to hire an artist to help them develop a community mural project to drive these dope peddlers out of their community.

Confession

These are all real!

Although many of these proposals probably seemed extreme, they all came from a similar place. They came from collaborating artists, arts and non-arts organizations and communities in the US searching for a way to bring some kind of balance to an out-of-kilter world. A balance between the safe and the challenging, the material and the transcendent, tradition and modernity, opportunity and responsibility, chaos and order. A

balanced future that honours and respects all of the community's stories. A balanced community that trusts itself to embrace the full range of these stories — the good and the bad, the settling and the unsettling. A balanced community that engages its creators to help weave a strong fabric out of these many stories to define its history, its struggles, its values, its beliefs and its dreams.

This idea of a community story is central to much of the cultural mediation work taking place in the US. Sometimes it manifests as a direct narrative, sometimes it is a raw provocation or an abstract seed planted for a conceptual conversation. Sometimes it shows up as ritual or celebration, a protest or a way to learn. At its heart, it is always collective and evolving.

Its history is interesting and quite deep. Although it has never been mainstream, this mediation at the crossroads of art and community has always been a part of America's cultural DNA. It has often been controversial too. Some of America's early settlers regarded music and dance and journeys of the imagination as sinful. Others used it to foment a revolution. During the Depression, the US government put thousands of artists, like Orson Welles, Jackson Pollock, Katherine Dunham and Dorothea Lange, to work documenting, commemorating, building and, yes, often criticizing, the American story. A similar thing happened in the late '70s through a jobs program call CETA, that ironically provided the largest single federal allocation for the arts in our history. That program planted the seeds of what has become a 40-year period of sustained growth in the community arts field in the US—a period that has seen thousands of artists engaged in community work, many academic and community training programs for artists and arts administrators, the creation of an online Community Arts Network and a growing body of research. It should be noted that this recent growth has occurred at the community and state level, with little influence or support from the federal government.

Confession!

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Judy Baca: Guadalupe | 1. Artist Saves Town |
| 2. COMPAS | 2. Art Heals School Community |
| 3. CityKids | 3. Art Changes Law |
| 4. John Bergman | 4. Art Cures Nasty Habits |
| 5. Arts-In-Corrections | 5. Warden as Impresario |
| 6. Normando Ismay | 6. Artist Rousts Crack |



My history in this work as an artist and administrator started with CETA and the prisons of California. For the past 20 or so years at the Center for the Study of Art & Community (CSA&C), we have been working to address the question: How can the arts contribute to the development of caring and capable communities?

This gives rise to other questions. What promotes and nurtures our individual and collective creativity? Are there different aspects of the creative called up by different circumstances?

Are there principles that can be applied that can strengthen the creative impulse as communities confront their most difficult problems?

How do cultural workers and their community partners share power, define success and build trust?

At the Center we work to build bridges and make translations between community arts resources and the needs of the broader community. We call it “arts-based community development.” Others call it “community cultural development” or just plain “community arts.” As the field has grown and proliferated, so has confusion about what it is and what it is trying to do. And so the need for clarity of purpose and intent has become critical to the field and to our work at the Center. Before I go any further, I would therefore like to share a few basic definitions.

- **Community:** *Groups of people with common interests defined by place, tradition, intention or spirit.*
- **The arts:** Activities or outcomes related to the visual, performing, literary, media or interdisciplinary arts.
Isabel Allende says: Art is to humankind what dreams are to individuals. Art is a revelation of the collective human soul.
- **Arts-based community development (ABCD):** Art-centred activities that contribute to the sustained advancement of human dignity, health or productivity within a community.

These include:

- Activities that NURTURE and HEAL people and/or communities;
- Activities that EDUCATE and INFORM us about ourselves and the world;
- Activities that BUILD and IMPROVE community capacity and/or infrastructure;
- Activities that INSPIRE and MOBILIZE individuals or groups.

As you can see, in the process of defining, we ended up trying to map the diverse and interrelated world of arts-based community development. Our aim was not to lay claim to the truth but to provide something that would provoke a conversation in the field.

A Map of Arts-Based Community Development



Most importantly, I have come to know that in the face of destruction we are impelled to create. Upheaval begets both crises and opportunity. Shiva dances to create as well as destroy. It's a survival impulse that I am not sure we have any control over. In the face of the unfathomable, the senseless, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of making meaning.

Making meaning, community-organizing, with hopefulness, and imagination—concepts like these have been strangers to the dominant American world view for nearly a decade. But, thankfully, in 47 days, as economic and political turmoil roils around us, this state of affairs is about to end. Here is a quote from our President-elect.

The “arts ...teach people to see through each other's eyes. ...to respect and understand people who are not like us. That makes us better citizens and makes our democracy work better. ...imagination sparked by the arts are more engaged.” (Barack Obama)

I have to say for American cultural workers these words come as a bit of a shock. It's very hard for us to imagine a leader who is comfortable linking imagination and creativity to the advancement of human understanding and democracy.

It's even harder to believe that beyond rhetoric there are already plans afoot to establish an Artists Corps for community development and re-establish the arts as a basic in education. While this is exciting, it is also a challenge. As a nation, we have a responsibility to help heal the wounds we have opened at home and around the world. There are thousands of artists who are primed and ready, with the skills and imagination needed to respond.

Some people think you can't beat the devil with a song, but they don't know!

Bill Cleveland

Bill Cleveland est directeur du Center for the Study of Art and Community, un organisme fondé en 1991 dans la région de Seattle (É.-U.) qui œuvre au développement de nouvelles relations entre les arts et la collectivité. Il est actif depuis 25 ans dans la production de programmes artistiques dans les domaines culturel, éducatif et communautaire pour nombre d'institutions dont le Walker Art Center, le programme californien *Arts-In-Corrections*, et l'Université d'été des arts de l'État de Californie. Il agit comme expert et consultant pour des institutions telles que le National Endowment for the Arts, Partners for Livable Communities, British American Art Association's International Arts et Education Initiative and the Urban Arts Institute. Depuis 30 ans, il mène en parallèle une pratique artistique comme auteur-compositeur et musicien professionnel, ce qui l'a amené à performer avec plusieurs groupes au Canada et aux États-Unis.

www.artandcommunity.com