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Community Arts 2007: A Muscular Year

By Linda Frye Burnham

The field of community-based arts showed its muscle this year. Energy coursed through the field, pumping new juice into the struggle for national cohesion, cultural equity and effective activist strategies. Significant movement took place in several community arts sectors: national cultural organizing, community arts in higher education, arts in criminal justice and youth arts.

Voices from the Cultural Battlefront



Perhaps the most stunning display of muscle occurred within a national coalition called **Voices from the Cultural Battlefront: Organizing for Equity**, which the participants define as "an ongoing 20-year international conversation about the role of art and culture in the struggle for human rights, social justice, cultural equity and a healthy natural environment." Right now, the group is focusing on the impact of "unrestricted, statesubsidized global free-market capitalism" on all these elements and on local community life. They have established a specific definitional framework for the terms of the conversation, and that framework includes:

- · A call for the development of a durable global pluralism,
- Testing the hypothesis that the unrestricted, state-subsidized global free-market economic model destroys communities by putting profit before people, market before community, and
- The right of any culture to expect fair and just treatment in relationship to all other cultures.

For details on their philosophy, see Jack Tchen's recent essay on CAN.

The list of core group members is worth noting, since they are people with many years of experience in the arts and activism and they are stepping up to leadership in a big way. The leaders are:

- Marta Moreno Vega, Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute, N.Y.
- Dudley Cocke, Roadside Theater, Appalshop, Whitesburg, Kentucky

The conveners are:

- Olga Garay, Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs, L.A., Calif.
- Kalamu ya Salaam, Listen to the People Project, New Orleans, La.
- Caron Atlas, independent consultant, N.Y.
- Sonia BasSheva Mañjon, Center for Art & Public Life, California College of the Arts, Oakland
- Bernice Johnson Reagon, public lecturer, songtalker, Washington, D.C.
- Amalia Mesa-Bains, California State U. Monterey Bay, Calif.
- · Tonya Gonnella Frichner, American Indian Law Alliance, N.Y.
- Peter Pennekamp, Humboldt Area Foundation, Bayside, Calif.
- Claudine Brown, Nathan Cummings Foundation, N.Y.
- E'Vonne Coleman, Duke University, Durham, N.C.Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen, New York University
- Jamie Haft, Imagining America, Syracuse, N.Y.
- Carlton Turner, Alternate ROOTS and M.U.G.A.B.E.E. (Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction), Raymond, Miss.
- Maurice Turner, Highlander Center, New Market, Tenn., and M.U.G.A.B.E.E., Raymond, Miss.
- · Nick Szuberla, 1000 Kites, Appalshop, Whitesburg, Kentucky

The news: Voices has developed a fascinating strategy for convening formal discussions around highly charged cultural issues, using its broad economic hypothesis to frame and organize the conversations. Just as important are the *where* and the *when* of these convenings: They are meeting several times each year before and during national conferences in the arts. Community sponsors in the host cities are encouraged to name one pressing local issue that the meeting can actively support and, as part of the convening activities, present local artists whose art addresses the identified issue.



Poster from the first 2007 meeting of the group now known as Voices from the Cultural Battlefront: Organizing for Equity. They met in June in New York University as part of the 30th anniversary celebration of the Caribbean Cultural Center. (Photo courtesy of CCC/ADI) click to enlarge

In 2007, they met in June in New York University as part of the 30th anniversary celebration of the Caribbean Cultural Center. They met again in December at the National Performance Network Annual Meeting in New Orleans, giving them access to interested parties attending both events as well as local arts activists in both major cities. (I was privileged to be invited to both sessions.)

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The group is driving not only to bring to national attention the calamities that are stressing U.S. communities — but to practice analysis of their common causes. In New York, the meeting's focus was "Sustaining Voices"

Battlefront and founder of New York's Caribbean Cultural Center/African Diaspora Institute (Photo courtesy of CCC/ADI)

from the Battlefront: Community Grounded Cultural Arts Organizations @ 30," pointing up the inequity of funding support available to longstanding arts organizations in communities of color. In New Orleans, the major focus was the flood following Hurricane Katrina and its impact on local artists, arts organizations and the people in their neighborhoods — always within the framework of the power structure's economic, political, legal and social decisions that changed everything for lower-income and working-class people in the Gulf Coast.

The New Orleans meeting used a convening framework that guided the conversation with a firm hand. It began with the Voices global-economic hypothesis, voiced by Dudley Cocke, after which we took a guided bus tour of the areas of the city that were devastated by the failure of the levees; the tour included stops for performance and video by local artists. We then moved on to a Community Forum under the leadership of local activist Kalamu ya Salaam. That forum included a story circle during which the New Orleans artists each described what an average day is like in his/her life. This personal testimony helped carve out a picture of what has happened there and why. Subsequent analytical sessions made us all realize how much New Orleans is a microcosm for what can happen and is happening all over the U.S., and what steps can be taken next.

NPN deserves a tip of the hat for collaborating with Voices and foregrounding these discussions, which were crucial for many at the NPN conference who had been hungering for something real and consequential. I am personally grateful that the conversation I have been waiting for is finally on — in a way that actually works for everybody and has the real possibility of discovering a unity of purpose.

In 2008, more meetings are planned at conferences where there are bound to be artists vitally invested in positive social change. If they are anything like the meeting in New Orleans, they will be galvanizing. Voices plans to meet before and/or during the Alternate ROOTS Annual Meeting (Asheville,, N.C., in August) and the Imagining America Conference (Los Angeles, Calif., in October). Other meetings in concert with national gatherings are under consideration for Baltimore, Md.; Amherst, Mass.; and Denver, Colo.

Voices has authorized CAN to say that everyone is welcome to the conversation. To host or participate in a Voices forum, or to be added to the listserv, contact Voices at info@culturalbattlefront.net. An Internet team (Carlton Turner, Maurice Turner, Kalamu ya Salaam) is developing a Voices Web site that will post written materials, audio and video clips from past gatherings and a calendar of future meetings. As a follow-up to the book that documented the spirit and thinking of the early convenings, "Voices from the Battlefront: Achieving Cultural Equity" (Africa World Press, 1993),



Dudley Cocke, a leader of

Marta Moreno Vega, a leader of Voices from the Cultural

Kalamu ya Salaam, local Voices convener and director of Listen to the People Project, New Orleans, La. (Photo courtesy of kalamu.com)

Voices plans to transform its written materials as an online book/reader in PDF form, published annually and posted on the Web site. The site will appear at http://www.culturalbattlefront.net/.

National Cohesion in Community Arts and Higher Education

The national network loosely know as CAPi, the Community Arts Partnership Institute, which we wrote about in "A Landmark Year: Community Arts and Higher Education 2006" (September 2006), continued to meet and look to the future. Much of this convening activity was aided by the Nathan Cummings Foundation, which has invested prominently in this sector of the field.

The national network loosely know as CAPi, the Community Arts Partnership Institute, is organizing its first national convening for March 2008 at MICA in Baltimore. Above: "art/vision/voice: Cultural Conversations in Community," a casebook, the first publication of the CAPi group. (Photo courtesy of www.mica.edu/CAP) Relationship, Reciprocity, Reclamation: The Arts at Cal State Monterey Bay" by Jan Freya (April 2007). In addition, Columbia College Chicago is making great strides in educating "the teaching artist" and California College of the

Arts is perfecting a technique for teaching college students to mentor sixth-toninth-grade youth in after-school community arts programs.

The News: The CAPi coalition will come together March 16-18, 2008, at MICA in Baltimore for a **Community Arts Convening and Research Project**. The driving initiative behind this meeting is the creation of peer-reviewed publications that

- · generate new ideas and research,
- share resources and models for best practices in the field,
- · define and solve problems and
- · cultivate new partnerships.

It's a grassroots approach to the creation of a language for the field that can be shared between academics and community practitioners.

The editorial team has been collecting manuscript submissions from college and university faculty and students, as well as community arts practitioners; short versions of those submissions are available on the MICA Web site. Topics discussed in selected manuscripts will be explored during the convening, providing the authors with new input, and the finished essays will be published online here on CAN and on the project Web site.

There's also big news from Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life, the national consortium of colleges and universities committed to public scholarship in the arts, humanities and design.

The News: In 2007, the IA's headquarters rotated off the University of Michigan campus and took up a term of residence at Syracuse University under the leadership of a new director, Jan Cohen-Cruz. Cohen-Cruz is one of the foremost scholars and practitioners in the field and many were excited to hear of her move from NYU to Syracuse. IA projects gathering steam right now are the Tenure Team Initiative on Public Scholarship, and the Curriculum Project, as well as an online publication of resources for civically engaged graduate education.

IA's Tenure Team Initiative is an important move toward legitimizing and credentialing community-arts scholarship in higher education. Faculty all over the country have been struggling to get solid support and credit for their community-arts programs. The TTI leads a movement to define "public



Community arts scholar/practitioner Jan Cohen-Cruz, who in 2007 became the new director of the national consortium Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life (Photo courtesy of Imagining America)

scholarship" and make specific recommendations for promotion and evaluation policies. IA's former director, Julie Ellison, and its research director, Tim Eatman, are writing a TTI Report that will "analyze the plural roles and zigzagging work cycles of the campus-based public scholar," says Cohen-Cruz. "Then in June, a national working meeting will explore various scenarios to implement such policy."

IA's Community Cultural Development (CCD) Curriculum Project just received funding from Nathan Cummings Foundation to identify strengths and weaknesses in CCD education currently available at U.S. colleges and universities. Leading the investigation is a truly muscular team: Roadside Theater's Dudley Cocke, writer/consultant Arlene Goldbard and IA's CohenCruz and Jamie Haft. Among the weaknesses found so far:

- lack of balance between disciplinary training and community work,
- insufficient grounding in the larger cultural and social context for the work, and
- true equity in campus-community relationships.

National Cohesion in Arts in Criminal Justice

There's been a national rumble from the arts-in-corrections sector over the past few years as prison-arts advocates and artists working in prisons and juvenile detention centers and prevention programs began to organize and publish.

In January 2007, CAN published "Creating Behind the Razor Wire: An Overview of Arts in Corrections in the U.S.," an intensive look at the growing field by researcher Krista Brune. Brune went on to create a voluminous Web site,

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 Young People

PrisonArts.info, with Victoria Sammartino and VoicesUnbroken. During 2007, CAN also published other texts on art and prisons:

- "Living Like a Refugee: Peggy Diggs
 Takes a Design Problem to Prison"

 Logo for PrisonArts.info, a Web site developed from a yearlong respect to faster
- "Speaking in Poems," by an inmate
- "Doing Time in the Garden: Life Lessons Through Prison Horticulture" (from New Village Press)
- "Notes on Prison Theater in Northern Uganda"
- "The 1000 Kites Summit: A Community Arts Focus Group"
- "Art and Its Transformative Power," by an inmate

Scholarship in this sector also recently benefited from the 2007 online publication of three older but seminal reports on arts-in-corrections:

- The often cited 1983 Brewster Report, now available online from
 the William James Association. It's rigorous cost-benefit analysis of
 the California Department of Corrections Arts-in-Corrections program
 (now defunct). Brewster estimated that the program's \$162,790 cost
 generated benefits worth \$228,522 in the four prisons studied. This
 seminal report is finally available on the Web for everyone to access,
 here.
- A 1988 CDC Report on outcomes for 177 inmates who participated in the Arts-in-Corrections program and were paroled December 1980-February 1987. Six months after parole, Arts in Corrections participants had an 88% rate of favorable outcomes (such as no recidivism) as compared to the 72.25% rate for all CDC releases. For the one-year period, the Arts-in-Corrections favorable rate was 74.2%, compared to 49.6%. Two years after release, 69.2% of the Arts in Corrections parolees retained their favorable status, in contrast to the 42% level for all releases. CAN published this report in 2007 and it may be downloaded here.
- "An Evaluation of an Arts Program for Incarcerated Juvenile
 Offenders," a 2003 study by Mark Ezell and Michelle Levy on
 recidivism and violent-incident rates in three intensive art programs
 at juvenile facilities in Washington. Originally published in the Journal
 of Correctional Education, it's downloadable here as a PDF.

The News: The very first national Arts in Criminal Justice conference took place in June 2007, presented by the wildly ambitious City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program (MAP), which conducts great projects uniting Philadelphia communities with inmates at the state prison in Graterford. Several hundred passionate artists and administrators gathered for lots of panel discussions that offered histories, case studies and best practices. One particular highlight was a full day at Graterford where we met and talked with many of the inmate artists who work with MAP. One of them, Charles H. Lawson (a.k.a. Zafir), gave a stirring keynote address on "Art and Its Transformative Power" to the conference in Graterford's chapel. It has been published on CAN.

This conference stood out for its emotion. Grey-haired prison-arts advocates who had been slaving stubbornly in the field for many years met for the first time and were able to put faces to names they had been hearing all their professional lives. In their presentations, they spoke with such compassion and empathy for their imprisoned collaborators that it brought audiences to tears more than



"Healing Walls (Inmates Journey)," part of the Mural Arts Program's Healing Walls project that brought together SCI-Graterford inmates with victims of crime and their advocates to construct two large-scale outdoor murals in Philadelphia, designed by lead artist Cesar Viveros (Photo courtesy of MAP) click to enlarge





once.

Meanwhile, a cohort of organizers was meeting throughout the conference to talk about the possibilities for the national cohesion of this sector. So far they have agreed establish a collaborative Web site and to organize smaller meetings across the country over the next 18 months, in advance of an international prison-arts conference in Florida.

"Healing Walls (Victims Journey)," the second of the Healing Walls murals. To create these works, MAP and the Pennsylvania Prison Society facilitated sessions both inside and outside of the prison where stakeholders were brought together to discuss their stories. (Photo courtesy of MAP) click to enlarge

Creative Forces: Strong New Movement in Youth Arts

Several years of persistent work is coming to fruition in Creative Forces (CF), a new youth educational-theater ensemble based in New Orleans, La. A joint project of Crossroads Project on Art, Learning and Community, directed by Mat Schwarzman, and the National Performance Network (NPN), it's a brave step into community-based peer-to-peer education with a special focus on arts infusion. The project recently got a fiscal infusion of its own in the form of two years of funding from the Ford Foundation, and they're off to the races. I got to visit the project in December.

CF trains and supports "small ensembles of ninth-to-twelfth graders who create and perform original plays, poetry, songs and dances after school as a way to inspire younger children to learn, grow and succeed." There's already one CF peer-educator ensemble at work at New Orleans Charter Science and Math High School, in partnership with a strong coalition of other local schools and organizations.



The Creative Forces crew from New Orleans (Photo courtesy of Crossroads) click to enlarge

The News: Creative Forces has started off with a bang. They already have a repertoire of performances, workshops and publications that includes:

- "Lifelines," a musical drama based on the lives of CF members that teaches about the respiratory system,
- "Dropping Science," a series of interactive drumming and dance workshops that teach physics, and
- "Life Through Our Eyes," an album of youth-positive music and poetry produced by CF members.

They've used these products in workshops for hundreds of primary and middle-school children in Orleans Parish after-school programs. In 2008, the teens will also participate in educational-policy workshops and in meetings and public forums at the local, regional and national levels to advocate for the spread of creative cultural approaches to learning.

The teen artists in this ensemble receive thoughtful, intensive training and they even sign a Creative Forces Pledge in which they promise to bring their "highest selves" to the tasks of the project, which are: to educate their younger brothers and sisters, using their abilities as artists and activists; to expand themselves as the central agents in their own personal development; to learn to live and work alongside their peers with integrity; to prepare themselves to "take over the world" bequeathed to them by their elders and ancestors; and to believe in "love, peace, justice and beauty as the most powerful forces in the universe." Best of all, the vast majority of the CF leaders are people under 25, including project Manager Ishaneka Williams. In performance, they knock your socks off. You can hear them on MySpace.

Creative Forces grows out of years of work by Schwarzman and his team of researchers, writers, cartoonists, educators and organizers, who have been developing instructional media along with Oakland's New Village Press. In 2005, New Village published the very successful "Beginner's Guide to Community-Based Arts" by Schwarzman and cartoonist Keith Knight: 10 nonfiction graphic stories communicating basic principles at work in the field right now, using a language accessible to any reader regardless of age, discipline or reading level. The book is grounded in Crossroads' CRAFT model, five elements of



From Crossroads' CRAFT Model teaching five elements

the community-based art process: Contact, Research, Action, Feedback and Teaching. In 2007, Crossroads inaugurated the CRAFT Circle, a national group of teachers, artists, youth leaders and activists who use "The Beginner's Guide" in various types of learning environments. The group is open to all; see the Crossroads Web site for an annotated list of members across the U.S.

of the community-based art process: Contact, Research, Action, Feedback and Teaching (page from the "Beginner's Guide to Community-based Arts" by Crossroads' Schwarzman and Knight -New Village Press) click to enlarge

Creative Forces is the front-line advance guard of an innovative, fully baked long-range plan by the Crossroads team to change education as we know it from the ground up, starting in one of the most distressed communities in the U.S. Watch for a lot of stimulating audio, video and text tools to be launched out of this work.

Community Art in My Back Yard: Bricolage

This 2007 round-up would not be complete without a report on my experience of community art in my own back yard, the Piedmont region of North Carolina. This year saw the launch of the **Bricolage Arts Festival**, the brainchild of Founding Director Anne Willson. It was a November fourday event that took place all over the 11-county region called the Piedmont, right in the middle of the state; its big cities are Greensboro and Winston-Salem, but most of it is rural. Artists in all media from across the region were invited to submit proposals for the development of new works by cross-disciplinary or cross-county teams. The result was a roster of seven teams of dancers, musicians, filmmakers, composers, poets and visual artists, several of whom met each other for the first time in this project. This kind of effort is unprecedented in the Piedmont.

Bricolage artists had no mandate to base their new work in the history, culture or environment of their own communities, but many did. For instance, Greensboro painter Jack Stone and Madison muralist Kitty Williams created a mural in Eden (pop. 16,000), in Rockingham County (pop. 93,000), up on the Virginia border. "River Boat Men: Dan River Trading, 1835," 12' x 36', depicts African-American entrepreneurs who guided long, low riverboats known as bateaus up and down the county's rivers, carrying goods and people from one town to



The local community comes out for the unveiling of the "River Boat Men" mural in Eden, NC. (Photo by Steven Durland) click to enlarge

another. The mural is placed in a small park next to the Eden Historical Society, which mounted a companion exhibition about the background and creative process of the mural. The unveiling, attended by about 100 enthusiastic people, was accompanied by a wine reception in a resplendent oriental-rug showroom across the street, with speeches by local dignitaries and a jazz combo.

But nothing I have ever seen anywhere can match, for me, the collaboration that happened in my own little village of Saxapahaw (pop. 1,200) on the Lower East Side of Alamance County. "Alluvial Fusion" was an installation in the village's former textile mill (at work 1837-1994) by the (brand-new) River Artists Collective, nine visual artists, musicians and writers. They worked alone and together in the mill's dye room on 57 individual artworks — weaving. paintings, totems, clay forms, sculptures, collages, live music and a slide show — all evoking the history of the mill, the village and the river that runs through it, The Haw. After so many years of watching audiences respond



The author hangs a wish on a participatory artwork in "Alluvial Fusion," an installation by the River Artists Collective in The Rivermill, Saxapahaw, N.C., for the Bricolage Arts Festival (Photo by Steven Durland) click to enlarge

to work about the places where they live, this gift from my hometown artists brought me to a much deeper understanding of the value of community art.

Saxapahaw is not a town but an unincorporated area whose residents live in old cottages that formerly housed the mill's workers. Half of the houses are still owned by the family that owned the mill. There is no central gathering place other than the

convenience store, the post office and the churches. "Alluvial Fusion" drew a diverse audience of people, mostly local, many of whom do not know each other, all of them curious about these nine artists and their efforts to express their feelings about the



"Alluvial Fusion," installation view during the exhibition (Photo by Steven Durland) click to enlarge

place we share. As I moved through the installation, I saw them recognize the local materials: muscadine vines, copper, cotton fibers, clay from the riverbank. I saw older people in tears beholding sculptures made of objects the artists had found in the disused mill: bobbin, shuttles, spinners and other equipment for weaving. They clearly had a strong connection to the mill's past. Most evocative was the poetry of Marjorie McNamara, and her creative nonfiction, which steeped the installation in quotes from literature, diaries and histories of the Southern cotton mill:

"Lizard finger, pick toe: The mountain people working in the mills named the machinery after what it looked like."

"On the mill hill, you never locked your doors. It was silly to do so because everybody's skeleton key was just alike. If you didn't want anybody to come in, you shut the door. An open door meant 'holler and come on in!"

"It is called the Hau-River from the Sissipahau Indians, who dwell upon this stream. Here is plenty of good Timber, and especially of a Scaly-barked Oak ... and the Land is extraordinarily Rich, no Man that will be content within the Bounds of Reason can have any grounds to dislike it."

By the time I reached the end of the installation, standing in front of the slide show of the river itself and listening to the ripple of live music that so beautifully enlivened it, I felt my roots growing deep into the riverbank beneath the mill, and I knew that after 15 years I was finally at home in Saxapahaw. Nothing else has ever made me feel that way. Only art could do it

Last Word

I certainly don't mean to slight all the other wonderful gatherings and work that brought the field of community arts to life this year, including:

- The 1000 Kites Summit, which brought something new to meeting technology.
- The Art & Social Change Funding Circle, a new collaboration between the Zing Foundation and the Threshold Foundation that will fund arts and social change;
- "Conversations Across Cultures: Community Arts Education, Exploring Possibilities," a November conference at Columbia University Teachers College that opened our eyes to all the innovation going on uptown in N.Y.C.;
- New community-based approaches to art and politics, like "The
 Future of Nations," the exhibition year theme of the 18th St. Arts
 Center in Santa Monica, Calif., devoted to the 2008 Presidential
 election, including a voter-registration drive, a college poll-worker
 recruitment push and public discussions/events on pressing
 constitutional issues:
- The Piedmont Triad Initiative for Community Arts, a two-year local N.C. project that will encourage arts-based community development in the Piedmont Triad:
- And all the other new initiatives coalitions, convergences, studies, strategies, courses, Web sites, blogs and everything else we alerted you to in APInews this year (use the CAN search engine to find specific items).

2009 is shaping up to be another great year in the field. Don't forget to check the CAN calendar.

Linda Frye Burnham is a co-director of the Community Arts Network.

NOTES

Web site addresses related to this story

Voices from the Cultural Battlefront: Organizing for Equity http://www.cuturalbattlefront.net

Community Arts Convening & Research Project

http://www.mica.edu/communityartsconvening/article.cfm?entry=93

Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life http://www.imaginingamerica.org

Mural Arts Program http://www.muralarts.org/

Arts in Criminal Justice National Conference http://www.artsincriminaljustice.org

Crossroads Project on Art, Learning and Community http://www.xroadsproject.org

Bricolage Arts Festival http://www.bricolageartsfestival.org

Thousand Kites http://www.thousandkites.org/

Arts & Social Change Funding Circle

http://www.zingfoundation.org/sha/funding_circle.php

The Future of Nations http://www.18thstreet.org/futureofnations/

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Comments

Dear Linda,

Thank you for documenting highlights of 2007 in the U.S. community arts field so beautifully and thoughtfully! I appreciate your enthusiasm for the work and ability to report on projects in such a full-bodied way, not only in this fine report, but in your regular blogs. Indeed it seems the field has been flexing its creative muscle this past year. Being a relative newbie, I am always wondering if I am observing a real renaissance or if everything simply shimmers because I have given it my attention. I am truly grateful for your educated perspective AND your candor to admit, even after a lifetime in this work, that a local Saxapahaw exhibition could move you to a deeper understanding of the value of art to a community.

And, Steve, thank you for knocking yourself out humbly in the background to make this website sing!

Happy 2008!

Lynne

Posted by: Lynne Elizabeth 1 at January 1, 2008 08:47 PM

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