Peacebuilding and the Arts Update
January, 2013

It is the last weekend before the spring semester begins at Brandeis, and it looks like the semester will be a full one. I’ll be teaching The Arts of Building Peace for the first time since the publication of the Acting Together anthologies. The Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts will also be hosting ten young artists from Bahrain for a week of training and exchange in April. I’ll be working with Jane Sapp on “A Way Out of No Way,” an exciting project to document her cultural work practice, mostly in communities of color in the US. I’m scheduled to conduct trainings or present at conferences this spring – at Brandeis’ Festival of Social Justice in February, at MIT in Cambridge and in Los Angeles in March, Milwaukee in April, and Chicago in May. And, with partners from ReCAST, Inc., we’ll be launching multi-lingual versions of the Acting Together documentary, in communities around the world that speak Spanish, Arabic, Hebrew, Sinhala, Tamil, Japanese and English. In fact, we’re planning a campaign to significantly extend the reach of the documentary.

Before I jump onto the speeding train known as spring semester, I’m taking a few moments to reflect on this past fall, which was an extraordinary period for the field of Peacebuilding and the Arts. I’m writing this to synthesize my learning for myself, and also to share impressions and questions with colleagues, in hopes of enlisting your thoughts and responses.

Highlights from work at Brandeis: At Brandeis, the Rose Art Museum’s exhibition Dor Guez: 100 Steps to the Mediterranean, a beautiful, subtle and powerful work that tells the story of the Christian, Palestinian community of Lod (now Israel), opened conversations within the Brandeis community on many levels. The Ethics Center supported a residency of Farhat Agbaria, a facilitator of dialogue, timed to coincide with the Dor Guez exhibit. In September, after Farhat left, I wrote up the following reflections:

Farhat Agbaria, a Palestinian Israeli facilitator of dialogue visited Brandeis from September 16 through October 1, 2012… In the course of his visit, Farhat participated in fourteen meetings with classes, clubs, and members of the faculty, and, in addition, co-led with me two weekend workshops “Facilitating Encounters through Art.” I was privileged to host Farhat and work with him over the course of two weeks.

In creating Farhat’s schedule, I was surprised when the Brandeis Israel Public Affairs Committee requested time with him. I was impressed by the thoughtful preparation by the student organizers, the attendance of some 35 or 40 students, and the openness of the students to hear perspectives on issues of identity in Israel and the experiences of the Arab minority that most had not previously engaged. Similarly, students and faculty in two
Hebrew classes invited Farhat to share with them, in Hebrew, reflections on his work as a dialogue facilitator, and his perspectives on living in Israel as a Palestinian. Many had never heard of Seeds of Peace or similar programs. It is heartening that members of the Brandeis community are willing to engage with perspectives that are likely to challenge their own.

The exhibition and the museum turned out to be extremely generative spaces for encounters: with ourselves, each other, the artworks, and with the history of violence, erasure and resilience that Dor Guez’s work documents with such composure and restraint. Members of a theatre course on The Collaborative Process spent an hour viewing the exhibition, and then created an extraordinary performance in the gallery space itself. With little time for analysis or discussion, the students embodied the themes of hiddenness and fear that are depicted in the works of visual art.

The weekend intensives each attracted about 20 participants, including both Brandeis students as well as socially engaged artists from the Boston area and beyond. One participant who works with the UN came from Turkey just for this weekend. During the first evening of each weekend, Farhat and I asked participants to draw a set of eyeglass frames. In one lens, they drew symbols of their identity that would be part of the lens through which they would perceive the workshop and the exhibition. In the other lens, they depicted symbols representing aspects of the identity of one of their grandmothers. (The glass frames and the symbols and stories they came to represent were first shared in pairs; and then participants were asked to introduce their partners to the group in the voice of the partner’s grandmother.) Two members of the group, one an undergraduate and one a graduate student, were extremely moved by this exercise. Both came to Brandeis from war zones, and both brought painful stories they had never shared before. Their urgent need to tell made me wonder whether we as a community are providing enough opportunities for the students we invite from and send to zones of violent conflict to engage in the processing of experiences in ways that are healing for themselves and that minimize risks of harms to those with whom they work.

The two weekend workshops were conducted at The Rose Art Museum. On the concluding day of each weekend, participants viewed Sabir, a large video installation that layers the narrative of the dispersion of a community with images of the sun setting over the sea. Participants were asked to create collages inspired by the themes of the video and the exhibition as a whole, perhaps incorporating copies of personally meaningful artwork or objects they had been asked to bring with them. These collages were shared in groups of three to five people, who then created short performance pieces based on them. The results were creative and powerful, reflecting deep listening to each other and to the exhibition.
One group, including one of the students who had tearfully shared her feelings of outrage and shame in response to violence in a region not so far from terrain depicted in the exhibition, arrayed itself up the steps leading up from the gallery to a small hallway one floor above. The reverential quality of the gallery entered their brief performance, as this student intoned a prayer, in English and in her own language, asking for forgiveness for the crimes of her people.

One very interesting aspect of this experience is that the workshop was not designed to “dig deep.” Nevertheless, the first weekend workshop with Farhat proved to be particularly intense. Participants from conflict regions chose to go to these deeper painful places just because there was an invitation to tell stories about identity. Their responses brought us close to communities in conflict regions throughout the world, and the workshop participants did impressive work for which they were grateful. But there is no doubt that the experience was more intense than some participants anticipated.

This experience reminded me of the extent to which we run the risk of re-traumatization in this work. I was reminded how important it is for participants to be supported to make informed decisions about whether to open themselves to such vulnerabilities. I came away from the weekend thinking that we who work in the peacebuilding arts field need to be sure that follow-through support is available for the people we work with – to be provided either by us, or by sensitive and wise members of communities, or by trained professionals. I hear echoes of Augusto Casafraanca of Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani in Peru, who commented on the difficulty but ultimately the importance of inviting people to engage with painful memories.

Other highlights from Brandeis last fall included the screening of “Never Sorry!” a documentary film about Ai Weiwei. That film and my on-going work with a Brandeis MA student from China have led me to think a great deal about the meaning of ‘peacebuilding’ in societies ruled by authoritarian regimes, and the role of the arts in such contexts. It is art’s celebration of human freedom that I think might be its most significant contribution in these settings. Engaging with art invites people to express themselves freely and responsibly; it can lift up the human spirit and cultivate bonds of interconnectedness.

During the last semester, The Rose Art Museum hosted the distinguished human rights photographer, Fazal Sheikh. His respect for the dignity of each person he photographs is inspiring. I gave him copies of the Acting Together anthologies and documentary, and look forward to hearing his response.

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In October, I traveled to the University of British Columbia to co-convene, with Michelle LeBaron, a roundtable on the theme of resilience, the arts and social transformation, hosted by the Peter Wall Institute for Advanced Studies. She and I are in the process of completing a full report on that roundtable, so here I will mention just a few aspects.
First, I was able to invite to this gathering a few people from Brandeis networks: Mary Ann Hunter (Australia), Catherine Filloux (NYC), Kitche Magak (Western Kenya), and Dijana Milosevic (Serbia) from the Acting Together project, and Kim Berman (South Africa) from the ReCasting Reconciliation through Culture and the Arts project. Michelle invited scholars and practitioners from her network, including several involved in Expressive Arts Therapy. We were also joined by a number of scholars and artists from the UBC/Vancouver area, including a neuroscientist, an art historian, a pianist, a dancer. One evening we met with associates of the Peter Wall Institute who represented a wide range of disciplines.

The combination of different perspectives and modalities of working, was thrilling! We explored the theme of resilience, for example, first by hearing remarkable stories of individual and community resilience told by Kim and Kitche. On the mornings following each of these stories, we explored the theme further through theatre, writing and movement workshops – in other words, through processes that were also aesthetic. We then stepped back and thought about resilience analytically.

These were some key insights for me: Resilience is a quality of systems that refers to the capacity to return to a steady state (or perhaps even to a higher state of organization) following a trauma or shock to the system. It can be thought of as a quality of persons, but more interestingly for us in the peacebuilding and the arts field, is that it can be thought of as a quality of communities. In the latter case, we can begin to address the kinds of resources – arts organizations, community centers, cultural rituals, festivals, etc. – that provide opportunities for communities to restore themselves, and for individuals in communities to heal and to develop. In the aftermath of war, it isn’t just the persons who need to heal; the networks, beliefs and values that form the social fabric also are in need of repair. The arts and cultural work can address that level of transformation as well. In addition, we considered the insight that ‘resilience,’ per se, is not necessarily ethically positive. Viruses and exploitive economic systems and totalitarian regimes can also be thought of as ‘resilient.’

I came to some new insights about resilience for me, personally. Resilience has a lot to do with the nature of the communities and the teams we are part of. In many ways, my own resilience in the face of stresses, disappointments and demands depends upon who is there to back me up, to help me think through dilemmas, to acknowledge errors and to forgive myself.

One aspect of resilience is humor! At the roundtable, we summed up our learning from the week through an exercise where we presented our imagined arts-informed world through a TV news show in the year 2030. Serendipitously, Michelle and I were paired on this exercise – and we laughed so deeply as we planned our coverage of a future lesbian president of the United States arriving in Peru to celebrate the first major reversal in rising sea water levels. Necessary policies were successfully changed due to the presence of artists in every governmental agency throughout the world. We made fun of ourselves (by naming me ‘Fluffy’ for instance) and alluded to the foibles of many
roundtable participants in our ‘newscast.’ Laughter can restore the capacity to recast trials and disappointments through the prism of humor. It is a precious gift!

The combination of approaches to arts and social change represented by members of the roundtable led me to think about how we frame our field. Michelle and I chose ‘Social Transformation through the Arts’ because it cast a conceptual net wide enough to comfortably house peacebuilding/arts, expressive arts, community cultural development and other creative human and economic development initiatives as well. As we seek to articulate the theories of change that are implicit in particular practices we can ask ourselves a couple of core questions:

1) Is the change effort directed primarily toward individuals, communities, societies or the whole global community? What assumptions does the initiative make about how to leverage changes at one level to changes at the other level?

2) Is the change effort directed toward human rights, building relationships across difference, economic justice, retributive or restorative justice, enhancing resilience, healing, capacity-building (etc.)? What is the type of transformation that the effort cultivates?

A concrete outcome from the Vancouver roundtable is the idea of a journal for the Arts and Social Transformation field – a platform for sharing of scholarly and creative work that would be peer-reviewed but also open to creative formats such as portfolios of images and videos of performances. Kitche Magak and Mary Ann Hunter are currently exploring options….

When our report on the Vancouver roundtable is completed, we will post it on the website of the program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, and announce it in the next newsletter. Keep your eyes peeled: it was a beautifully rich gathering.

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A week after I returned from the Vancouver roundtable, I left for a 7-day visit to Israel and Palestine. My first stop was the Theatre Department at Tel Aviv University, where Acting Together contributor Lee Perlman had arranged for a screening of the documentary. Prior to the film, actors affiliated with the TAU performed a staged reading of the short scenes that are woven through Lee and Aida (Nasrallah)’s chapter in the Acting Together anthology. It was thrilling to see this little play brought to life, and also to witness a screening with Hebrew sub-titles. Following the film, a panel discussion was facilitated by Chen Alon, also (like Aida and Lee) completing his PhD in theatre. Chen is a founder of Ex-Combatants for Peace, a courageous group of Israelis who refuse to serve to maintain the occupation in the West Bank. It turns out that that group has been working, primarily through the approaches of Augusto Boal, with a group of ex-fighters from Tulkarem, in Palestine. He is also a director of an important new Israeli production “Peacocks of Silwan” which supports is audiences to face immediate issues of the demolition of Palestinian homes in East Jerusalem. (http://www.accofestival.co.il/catalog.php?id=386)
I spent most of my time in Jerusalem attending the conference “Mediating Peace: Reconciliation through Art, Music and Film” sponsored by York St. John University from the UK. This conference afforded me the opportunity to re-connect with Felicity Laurence, and her work on empathy and music, and also to engage with the conceptual frameworks of theological discourse on issues of reconciliation. I offered a keynote, sharing learnings from the Recasting Reconciliation and Acting Together projects, and again screening the documentary. All of this was very well received.

What has stayed with me the most about this conference was the on-going discussion about the ethics of having a conference on reconciliation at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The issue was very live, because the conference organizers had faced challenges from their colleagues at York University, which maintains a boycott against Israeli academics. It felt horribly awkward to be addressing the topic of reconciliation at a gathering which was inaccessible to virtually all Palestinian people living in the West Bank or Gaza. The peace activist/archaeologist Judith Green, a long time friend living in Jerusalem, explained to me that she felt the boycott was counterproductive because it hardened the hearts and the defensive stances of Israelis, including those who lean to the left. I left grappling more deeply with these issues.

One colleague described a music project in which a few children from Israel were accompanying music instructors to a small Palestinian town. While the children were hungry for music instruction, the adults in the town were concerned about repercussions should neighbors discover their collaboration. As it turns out, this particular village exists without access to running water for several hours each day – although green lawns and swimming pools in a nearby Jewish settlement are visible to the Palestinian children. Felicity raised the question about the ethics of engaging in cross-border music exchange when the Palestinian children are without regular access to water. I wondered, at the very least, whether the Israeli children should be encouraged to communicate to others about what they are witnessing, and to write to government officials about their desire to change the situation for their new-found friends.

But what contributions can be made by artists who wish to contribute to more just and less violent outcomes for the peoples of the Middle East? I faced these questions again the day after the conference, when I worked with artists and educators affiliated with Seeds of Peace, and the following day as well, when I visited my dear friend, Mohammad Sawalha, in Nablus. I was happy to screen Acting Together in Arabic at the Palestinian House of Friendship, and to hear Mohammad’s enthusiasm about sharing parts of it with young people there.

“What choice do we have?” asks dialogue facilitator Farhat Agbaria. “We have to do something.” As I searched in the eyes of a young Palestinian friend who had been tortured in an Israeli prison, I wanted more options, better options. Given the current context in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict, I’m seeking ideas about how to make sense of the possibilities of arts-informed work there. Do we have the resources, power and will to contribute to meaningful and sustainable transformations? Where should we focus our energies?
The final journey of the fall took me in the opposite direction – to Tsu City, Japan for the bi-annual meeting of the International Peace Research Association. I have been co-convener of the Arts and Peace Commission since 2006, and I believe our presence in Japan was evidence of a true coalescing of our interdisciplinary and global field. Our deliberations and connections at IPRA benefitted enormously from the presence of Japanese colleagues who are part of the Arts and Peace Commission of Japan, and also three African artists and scholars whose participation at IPRA was supported by the Toda Institute. A group of serious young scholar/practitioners, including representation from every continent, is rising up and offering to take responsibility for thinking about the field as a whole.

The Arts and Peace Commission convened six sessions, as follows:

- Creating a Global Community of Practice, with papers by Olivier Urbain (US/Japan/Belgium) and Cindy Cohen (US)
- Building the Peacebuilding/Arts Field in Theory and Practice, with papers by Kyoto Okumoto (Japan), Eva Rodriguez Riestra (Australia), Itir Toksoz (Turkey)
- Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Arts, the Military and Peace, with papers by Michael Balfour (Australia/UK), Maria Elisa Pinto Garcia (Colombia), Mariah Steele (US), and Victoria Tomoko (France/Japan)
- Peacebuilding and the Arts in East and West Africa, with papers by Charles Mulekwa (US/Uganda), Hope Azeda (Rwanda) and Dele Ogunmole (Sierra Leone/Australia)
- Questions of Value: Evaluating Peacebuilding and the Arts, with papers by MaryAnn Hunter (Australia) and Michael Balfour (Australia)
- Performance and Non-violent Resistance: Joint Session of the Arts and Peace and the Non-violence Commissions, with papers by Roberto Varea (US/Argentina and Charles Mulekwa (US/Uganda), and a screening of Act I of the Acting Together documentary in Japanese, which includes segments from Dijana Milosevic (Serbia) in addition to Roberto and Charles.

In addition, Kitch Magak (Kenya) presented a paper on indigenous theatrical performance in conflict resolution and peacebuilding in Kenya, as part of a session of Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding Commission.
All of these sessions were fascinating and spoke to the commitment to research and reflection in the arts/peacebuilding field. Highlights for me include Michael Balfour’s paper on the ethical dilemmas of his applied theatre work with Australian veterans returning from war; Olivier Urbain on the role of comics in conveying attitudes toward nuclear weapons and the nuclear industry; Mariah Steele’s presentation on research about a modern dance/peacebuilding project in Northern Ireland. We hope to post revised versions of many of these papers on the Resource Library of the Peacebuilding and the Arts program at Brandeis, and we will announce these in upcoming e-newsletters.

In addition to the Arts and Peace Commission sessions, we played a central role in two special events. A book reading on issues of gender and peacebuilding, featured poetry read by Bernadette Muthien (convener of the Commission on Political Economy) from her book of poetry, *Ova*, and readings of relevant excerpts from the *Acting Together* anthology from Roberto Varea, MaryAnn Hunter, Charles Mulekwa, Kitche Magak, and me. The cumulative effect of hearing all these different voices sharing stories about violence, conflict transformation, gender and the arts was quite powerful in conveying the devastating consequences of war on the lives of women, the constraints that limit both women/girls and men/boys, and the enormous creativity artists and cultural workers bring to bear on these issues. And, we screened *Acting Together on the World Stage* for about 40 people, whose response was remarkable! People wanted the whole conference to watch the film. They wanted every head of state to watch it. Japanese activists encouraging their government to apologize for past war crimes want their government officials to see it. Hopefully we’ll be able to build on this momentum and be able to screen the film during a plenary session of the 2014 conference.

Many important conversations happened outside of the formal sessions. For instance, several IPRA members met with five arts and peace practitioner/researchers from Japan, forging real connections that left us all feeling enriched. Kitche Magak, Hope Azeda and Charles Mulekwa developed a concept for an East African peacebuilding/performance festival/training series.

Nearly all of the presenters and several others from the arts and peace commission met outside of commission sessions to share a bit more about each person’s work, and to generate ideas about how we can strengthen the field and our commission between now and the 2014 meeting. People made specific commitments to work on efforts related to

- outreach (to other IPRA commission, to other networks and communities of practitioners, and to leaders in the field to present in future conferences);
- communications within the commission – Maria Elisa Pinto Garcia created a linked-in network for all members of the commission;
- linking to regional peace studies organizations, particularly in Asia and Africa;
- bringing the vitality of the arts and peace commission to future IPRA conferences, by coordinating evenings of cultural sharing, reaching out to IPRA secretariat to reconsider session formats, possible film festival, exhibits, plenaries that are animated with artistic presentations.
• strengthening the field by advancing the idea of a refereed journal, by establishing a working group on ethics, efficacy and evaluation, and exploring possibility for pre-conference sessions at the 2014 IPRA to focus on key challenges for the field.

The willingness of people to take on commitments was truly heartening.

The Arts and Peace Commission also made some important changes related to the governance of the commission that will allow us to maintain the involvement of the leaders who founded the commission and who bring decades of experiences in the field and with IPRA, and also make a space for new leaders. We established a “Global Advisory Council,” and Olivier Urbain and Maria Elena Lopez Vinader accepted inaugural positions on it. In addition, we selected Maria Elisa Pinto Garcia and Kitche Magak to join me as co-conveners for the next two years.

Maria Elisa will be setting up LinkedIn Network for the Arts and Peace Commission, and we’ll be inviting readers of Peacebuilding and the Arts Now to join when it is up and running.

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After all of these opportunities to reconnect with friends, get to know new colleagues, engage intellectually, aesthetically, and strategically with leading peacebuilders and scholars from around the world, I am left with a strong sense of possibility and a feeling of relief. Our field is becoming recognized as a source of energy and innovation; increasingly, we will be invited to the table when major peacebuilding strategies are developed. I am heartened by new young (younger than me, at least!) leaders emerging from all around the world, and by structures emerging to allow us to share knowledge, explore dilemmas, and turn to each other for support.

There are several important practical issues underway. At Brandeis, I am hoping that colleagues here will embrace a recommendation to link the arts to the social justice mission of the university, and will support an interdisciplinary minor in Arts and Social Transformation, (or some other curricular coherence that will emerge from the institution’s strategic planning process). Our partner organization, ReCAST, Inc., will be launching an Acting Together Global Campaign, to ensure that our newly translated versions of the documentary are available to students and practitioners in regions throughout the world. (More on this soon.) There are at least two practical follow-ups from the Vancouver roundtable: we will be presenting at a September 2013 conference of representatives from 14 university-based Institutes of Advanced Studies, in hopes that this network might be enlisted to support our efforts to create an infrastructure for the arts and peacebuilding field; and Kitche Magak, MaryAnn Hunter and Mariah Steele (of IPRA) are pursuing the idea of a journal.
IPRA emerges as an important platform for reaching newcomers to the field, and for allowing leading peace researchers in other aspects of the field to be aware of the vitality, inclusiveness and rigor of the Arts and Peace field. I will work over the next two years to strengthen the communication and governance structures of the Arts and Peace Commission, and also develop possibilities of the 2014 gathering in Turkey, which could be a very good venue for thinking strategically about the contributions of the arts to true conflict transformation in the region. I also plan look into possibilities for pre- and post-conference sessions that address issues of ethics, efficacy and evaluation and arts/peacebuilding initiative.

I welcome thoughts and questions about all of these ideas.

Meanwhile, classes begin here at Brandeis tomorrow. I’m looking forward to the questions and the challenges that will be presented by engaged and energetic Brandeis students.

Cynthia Cohen
January 2013.