

# Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash

How artistic and cultural processes  
transform complex challenges



Cover image:

An image made from hand-crafted paper produced as part of a creative response by more than 150 school students and community volunteers. Flowers that had been placed as a memorial for those lost to a 1998 bombing in Omagh, Northern Ireland were incorporated into the paper. These gifts of beauty that emerged from devastation were presented to the families of victims and to three communities that had suffered losses, and then shared in exhibitions and a book. (*Petals of Hope*; Carole Kane, facilitating artist; 1999)

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## I. PRELIMINARIES

### *Acknowledgements*

I begin by honoring and acknowledging the creativity, generosity and wisdom of my friends and colleagues in the Arts, Culture, and Conflict Transformation field (ACCT). The work of these artists, cultural leaders, scholars and policy-makers, allows for the possibility of hope in the face of the enormous complex challenges confronting humanity and our planet in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Invite|Affirm|Evoke|Unleash: How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges* has arisen from this extraordinary community of inquiry and practice. The report never could have been authored by a singular voice. It has been an honor to think together with the brilliant, generous, creative, and committed people who have participated in this effort.

The inquiry was imagined by Anis Barnat and Csaba Manyai of the Community Arts Network, along with Ena Pervan of the Community Art Lab of the Porticus Foundation. I appreciate the thinking they invested in the framing of this inquiry before I became involved, their insightful contributions as the initiative evolved, and the patience, flexibility and artfulness of their “light-touch” oversight.

Nine months ago, Armine Avetisyan, Emily Forsyth Queen, and Ameer Shaheed accepted my invitation to join an administrative/writing team. We have met nearly every week since then. The initiative has benefited from their insights, questions and thoughtful attention, to both administrative and substantive matters. I am grateful for the unique knowledge they each brought to this inquiry, and for their persistence, commitment, care and accompaniment.

Armine Avetisyan, Bonface Beti, Jasmina Ibrahimovic, MaryAnn Hunter, Carol Kane, Ángela Pérez, Dagmar Reichart, Ameer Shaheed, Toni Shapiro-Phim, and Polly Walker took up the challenge to write research memos exploring the meaning of nine distinctive qualities of the arts. I am grateful for their seriousness, the range and depth of insight and experience reflected in their work, and their commitment to each other and to the project as a whole. Each of their topics warrants its own complete report, and I look forward to what might emerge in the next phases of this inquiry.

I am grateful to Carole Kane, John Paul Lederach and James Thompson for joining us as thinking partners. They brought decades of experience as scholars and practitioners, in expressive arts, conflict transformation and applied theater. Each of our many conversations—individually, as a group, together with researchers and with colleagues from Porticus/CAN -- contributed insights that helped shape both the form and content of the report. I also appreciate their artful attention to drafts of each of the research memos.

Special thanks to Toni Shapiro-Phim and Polly Walker for their suggestions, questions and writing as we wrapped up the report, and to our IMPACT colleague, Carmen Olaechea, who offered insightful and constructive suggestions. And thanks also to Interns Kyle Desrosiers and Leah Sagan-Dworsky who found useful data on the funding of arts and culture and completed other helpful tasks.

I appreciate the institutional and organizational settings that have given a home to this work, including IMPACT (The Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation); the Brandeis University Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts; and ReCAST, Inc (Re-imagining Community, Art and Social Transformation). The values and capacities honed through decades of our collaborative work have been indispensable to this research.

And many thanks to Ann Morgan and our cat Eleanor Roosevelt, who allowed (mostly) uninterrupted spaces for this work in the midst of the pandemic and the upheavals of a major household move.

Cynthia Cohen, PhD  
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*Statement of purpose*

This research project was proposed by the Community Arts Network (affiliated with the Porticus Foundation) and undertaken by Cindy Cohen and IMPACT colleagues in order to make a compelling case for the significance of arts and culture in addressing complex contemporary challenges.

This report is based on rigorous research into scholarship and practice, taking distinctive qualities of engagement with and through the arts as its starting point.

The purpose of the report is to augment Porticus’ efforts to invite other funders to support arts-based and cultural initiatives, and also to support Porticus Foundation grantees to generate resources from local funders for the initiatives they propose.

This research initiative aligns strongly with the missions of ReCAST, Inc., IMPACT, and the Brandeis University Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts.

*Table of Contents*

<b>I. PRELIMINARIES</b>	2
Acknowledgements	2
Statement of purpose	3
Table of Contents	3
Invite   Affirm   Evoke   Unleash: Short Form	5
<b>II. FRAMING SECTIONS</b>	8
Introduction	8
Report process	8
Report focus	9
Urgent calls for creative attention to complex challenges	10
Systems-based approaches for aligning with Complexity in contemporary challenges	12
	3

Toward ethical considerations for aligning creative processes with a culture of sustainability	14
<b>III. FINDINGS: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ETHICAL ARTS AND CULTURAL PROCESSES</b>	14
Arts and cultural processes INVITE through beauty	16
Arts and cultural processes INVITE multiple modes of sense-making	20
Arts and cultural processes AFFIRM dignity	20
Arts and cultural processes AFFIRM interdependence	22
Arts and cultural processes EVOKE emotional complexity and honesty	26
Arts and cultural processes EVOKE capacities needed to negotiate ambiguity	28
Arts and cultural processes EVOKE paradoxical curiosity	31
Arts and cultural processes UNLEASH agency	32
Arts and cultural processes UNLEASH creativity	35
Weaving Multiple Arts Qualities in a Single Transformative Initiative	37
<b>IV: FINDINGS: ARTFULNESS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE IN FIELDS BEYOND ART AND CULTURE</b>	39
<b>V. RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	42
Find new ways to reframe complex challenges as interconnected and move toward a culture of sustainability	42
Invest more resources over longer time periods in the field of arts and culture	43
Focus on ethical, anti-oppressive, aesthetic, and locally-rooted practices in artistic and cultural initiatives and beyond	44
Align practices and processes with complexity	45
Meaningfully engage artists and cultural workers in decision-making spaces, especially where they have historically been excluded	46
Protect freedom of expression and artists' human rights	47
Further document the power of arts and culture, gather collective insights, and build on this report	47
<b>VI. CLOSING WORDS</b>	48
<b>VII. APPENDICES</b>	55
Key features of contemporary global challenges by Ameer Shaheed (to be formatted)	55
Aligning practice with complexity by Emily Forsyth Queen (she/her/hers)	55
Engaging with beauty by Armine Avetisyan	55
The mind on art: cognitive functions and states associated with aesthetic engagement by Ameer Shaheed	55
Initial thoughts about the relationship between the arts and the affirmation of human dignity by Toni Shapiro-Phim	55
Interdependence by Polly O. Walker, PhD (she/her/hers)	55

Fostering honesty, exploration and disruption: starting points by Jasmina Ibrahimovic and Carole Kane	55
Negotiating ambiguity, nuance, and uncertainty: a view from Colombia by Ángela Pérez Mejía, PhD	55
Embracing paradox and contradiction by Ameer Shaheed, informed by a chart made by Dagmar Reichert	55
Invoking and inviting agency by Mary Ann Hunter	55
Understanding, celebrating and expanding creativity: the contributions of participatory theatre to addressing the complex challenge of peacebuilding in Kenya by Bonface Beti	55

### *Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash: Short Form*

How and why do arts and other aspects of culture contribute in constructive ways to addressing the complex challenges that confront humanity and the ecosystems of the planet?

Listen to this story told by John Paul Lederach, peacebuilding scholar/practitioner and thinking partner to those of us writing this report:

*About fifteen years ago in Nepal an event took place in a workshop that relates the unusual link between the arts, peacebuilding, and change processes. It happened shortly after a comprehensive peace agreement was ending the ten year Maoist war, arranged through negotiation between the major political parties and had ousted the king, ending the royalty in Nepal. I was part of group that had put forward a small proposal. Because the army had only ever reported to the king – it was called the Royal Nepal Army – and now with a peace agreement in place a new reality was emergent. In principle, the army would begin a transition toward civilian, and eventually elected government oversight and accountability. In this complex transition, the army generals had rarely if ever formally sat with the key politicians from across the spectrum political parties because their reporting mechanisms had exclusively taken place within the royalty structure.*

*At this off-record workshop we brought together a number of top generals and high-level politicians from ten political parties. Now, you might ask yourself if any possible link could made the would connect the arts in such a formalized and tense meeting -- is there any place for the arts in a conversation with dozens of generals and politicians, most of them quite on in age and all of them male given the nature of their Nepali structures and hierarchy at the time.*

*In the afternoon, prior to our supper, we asked them to participate in an exercise that involved mixed teams of 3-4 people. Each person had to develop a story around this context: Imagine twenty years from now, where your great grandchild crawling up on your lap before bed and asking you to tell a story. “Tell me again, Grandpa tell me again, how did the war end?” Their task was to tell a bedtime story to their great-grandchild about how the war ended and what they had done. That was the only assignment.*

*Our process required each person to give some thought to their story alone. Then they met in small groups and started to share out their ideas and even try out some storytelling. Finally, from the different groups a few people were selected to tell their story, live and with all the animation and embellishment they could muster.*

*As it turned out, there were some great grandfatherly storytellers. The exercise lasted most of the afternoon and even pushed us past our suppertime. I have never seen generals or politicians laugh so hard. At times the laughter bordered on tears because embedded in the process was a deep emotion tied to what they had lived but also to what might be coming and thinking about this with reference to their youngest family members. Each story tried to outdo the one preceding it, and in the end, they eventually gave garlands to the best stories. It was quite a fascinating process. It taught me a lot about taking the risk to try something different, even with people you might assume would refuse to participate in such an assignment. – John Paul Lederach, April 22, 2021.*

The many complex challenges facing our global communities include unresolved legacies of violence; the climate crisis and its multiple manifestations; gross inequalities based on colonial histories and on identities including race, caste, gender, sexual orientation or ability; the rise of authoritarianism and polarization within societies; forced migration and displacement; violent extremism; and the rapid loss of species, languages, musical traditions and whole cultures. Ethical arts and cultural processes can be crafted to evoke honesty, and nourish capacities to negotiate ambiguity and paradox, key features of complex systems: They unleash creativity and agency. They affirm the dignity of human beings and our interdependence with each other and the natural world. And they can be crafted to do all this not by manipulation or coercion, but by issuing invitations to engage, to enjoy, to co-construct meaning, and to be present -- to oneself, to others, to the natural world and to the opportunities and challenges that inscribe the present moment. These invitations are issued through the aesthetic dimensions of both processes and products that are designed to enliven, challenge and/or soothe by taking into account the perceptual capacities and preferences of those who witness and participate. It is through their beauty, and through the ways they simultaneously animate our sensory, cognitive and emotional faculties, that ethical arts and cultural work invite transformation while respecting the integrity of all who are involved. They can be crafted to offer this bounty of possibilities and in fact are indispensable to engaging constructively with the intertwined complex challenges urgently calling for attention.

In this report, we invite many readers into what might be unfamiliar and unexpected discourses in hopes of igniting creative thinking, rather than trying to convince through numbers and arguments. We take the perspective that the many challenges now confronting us are interconnected and all part of a **culture of unsustainability**. To change these dominant patterns, transformations are required which cannot be made through reasoning alone. Artistic and cultural practices offer modes of understanding and acting that are aligned with complexity, and will contribute to an emerging paradigm: a **culture of sustainability**.

We considered nine distinctive features that characterize engagement with and through arts and culture: **beauty, dignity, interdependence, honesty, paradox, ambiguity, agency and creativity, and multiple modes of knowing**. We conclude that ethical arts and cultural processes have a transformative power that:

- INVITES people into aesthetic experiences, aligning senses, cognition, emotions and spirit. These experiences can be crafted to engender distinctive ways of paying attention to reality, opening perception to complexities that might be difficult to face in the flow of everyday life. They engage multiple ways of thinking, sensing, feeling, imagining and meaning-making that go **beyond the purely rational**, offering experiences of **beauty**. Beauty is experienced when there is a pleasurable alignment between the formal qualities of an expression and the perceptual sensibilities, capacities and preferences of those who witness and participate.
- AFFIRMS **dignity and interdependence**. Ethical arts and cultural processes can be crafted to embody, evoke and engender recognition of dignity and awareness of interdependence.
- EVOKES feelings and **honest exploration** where repeated traumas and ongoing oppressions have resulted in numbness and silencing; and nourishes capacities to embrace the **paradox** and **ambiguity** that characterize complexity.
- UNLEASHES individual and collective **agency** and **creativity**.

We will illustrate these points through exploration of these nine distinctive qualities of the arts and related examples. These artistic and cultural practices are indispensable to engaging constructively with multiple complex challenges.

After an exploration and analysis of diverse perspectives on the nine distinctive features of engagement with arts and culture listed above, and considering ways in which these qualities are incorporated into other fields (such as nursing, business, conflict transformation and urban studies), we offer a set of recommendations:

- Find new ways to reframe complex challenges as interconnected and move toward a culture of sustainability
- Invest more resources over longer time periods in the field of arts and culture
- Focus on ethical, anti-oppressive, aesthetic, locally-rooted, and trauma-informed practices in artistic and cultural initiatives and beyond
- Align practices and processes with complexity, using systems-based approaches
- Meaningfully engage artists and cultural workers in decision-making spaces, especially where they historically have been excluded
- Protect freedom of expression and artists' human rights
- Further document the power of arts and culture, gather collective insights, and build on this report

This report is an invitation to engage with the extraordinary challenges and opportunities of the present moment by:

- Inviting beauty into our lives and into the world, summoning all modes of sense-making.
- Affirming dignity and interdependence.



- Embracing ambiguities and paradoxes and evoking honesty in the space where tears and laughter meet.
- Unleashing our own and each other's agency and creativity.

## II. FRAMING SECTIONS

### *Introduction*

*...You are matagi mālohi. Strong winds from sacred places and revered spaces*

*Moving between healer and warrior, you are the future ancestors carving visions of liberation we can't even imagine....*

*The same ancestors that are calling you to belief will also call you to unbelief, so your faith can take new form. So you can return to the source and be reminded of the commonality of our plurality.*

*You are matagi mālohi. Strong winds listening, nourishing, transforming.*

*-- from Matagi Mālohi, by Fenton Lutunatabua, Fijian poet  
and Pacific Communications Coordinator with 350.org*

Whether you are an artist or cultural worker, a funder or policymaker, the head of a cultural institution or a researcher, a culture bearer or activist, a young person or an elder, we welcome you to this report and hope it speaks to you. Whether you are concerned about the future of the planet and/or the sustainability of the community arts center down the block, we hope this report supports your efforts, nourishes your thinking, invigorates your imagination and lifts up your dreams. Please feel free to share it, attach it to your proposals, or quote a sentence or section: whatever would be helpful. We do not consider this report to be the end of an inquiry, but rather a platform for further conversation and a stimulus to further creative research.

### **Report process**

This research project and report were developed by IMPACT (Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation). Diverse, dynamic and imaginative, IMPACT<sup>1</sup> works globally to illuminate and strengthen the field of arts, culture and conflict transformation (ACCT). We believe that through deep and ethical engagement, ACCT contributes to creating a world where dignity, vibrancy, creativity and multiple forms of justice inscribe relationships with nature and each other. We also believe that constructively engaging with the urgent, complex challenges facing communities, humanity and the planet requires insights from many different sources -- including artistic and cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Administratively housed at Brandeis University in the United States, IMPACT itself is a grantee of the Porticus Foundation.

practices, wisdom traditions, multiple scholarly disciplines, and practitioners of many kinds, including artists, peacebuilders and other changemakers.

For these reasons, IMPACT composed a diverse team for this research project. We commissioned ten researchers, from ten countries, including scholar/practitioners based in universities, NGOs, and cultural organizations, to write memos investigating theory and practice surrounding different distinctive features of engagement with and through the arts. We encouraged them to allow their thinking to be informed by their cultures, their disciplines, their practice and their experiences. We turned to thought leaders in the ACCT field to challenge assumptions, raise questions, and suggest resources. We created opportunities for conversations among the researchers and the thought leaders. These conversations surfaced the “Invite! Affirm! Evoke! Unleash!” framework, which became a turning point in our thinking.<sup>2</sup> We also educated ourselves about the nature of complexity, complex adaptive systems, and the intertwined nature of contemporary challenges. All of these memos and conversations became grist for the current draft of the report.

We believe our inquiry drawing on multiple modes of knowing will be groundbreaking. Of course, the significance of this report depends on how you, the readers, make it your own and make use of it in the world. Whether you are skeptical of the contributions of arts and culture to constructive engagement with complex challenges, or a committed champion, we look forward to your comments, suggestions, questions, and your reservations. Like any creative act, we hope the development and dissemination of this report will open possibilities for new conversations, new inquiries, new framings of issues, and new questions: in other words, additional new creative acts.

## Report focus

*Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash* offers a compelling set of reasons why arts- and culture-based initiatives are worthy of consideration and support, illustrating its arguments with carefully selected examples. The report, like the central pieces of a wardrobe, can be “dressed up” or augmented for use in different settings and with different constituencies. We imagine it will be read and used by advocates seeking support for the field of socially engaged arts and cultural work, as well as those seeking support for specific initiatives. It is designed to be useful to those in and outside of funding agencies who are working with colleagues (or to convince colleagues) to better align funding and assessment processes with systems thinking, aspects of complexity and the particular qualities of engaging with the world through arts and culture.<sup>3</sup> We make our case based on intrinsic qualities of artistic engagement. We aim to convince through the transdisciplinary depth and rigor of our research coupled with a diversity of voices and examples of rich creative initiatives.

This is not to say that all artistic and cultural efforts are equally worthy of support. It is well known that artistic practices can be harmful: they can be deployed as propaganda, even in the service of war and torture, and in ways that perpetuate destructive hierarchies. Even well-meaning initiatives can

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul Lederach offered a framework of invite, evoke, and unleash, to which the writing team later added affirm.

<sup>3</sup> An excellent resource on systems thinking in arts and culture grantmaking is Linares, Nati and Caroline Woolard. “Solidarity Not Charity: A Rapid Report.” Grantmakers in the Arts (March 2021).

inadvertently cause harm, for instance, by undermining cultural integrity and appropriating cultural knowledge, disrespecting it and stripping it of its spiritual potency and resonance.

The ethical and aesthetic sensibilities that inform creative spaces and processes make all the difference. This report shows how and why works that embody the disciplines of the ‘moral imagination’ (explained below) as well as values of reciprocity and fairness, lay the groundwork for trust, cultivate qualities of presence and other capacities required for engaging constructively with complex challenges, and offer spaces for experimentation and innovation and for the emergence of new strategies for change.

The range of artistic and cultural practices is vast, including: participatory writing and painting workshops in refugee camps and prisons; Indigenous rituals; plays performed in rural marketplaces and national theatres; murals in public spaces; exhibitions in galleries and museums; and more. Some cultural productions address complex challenges directly; some serve to enliven, delight, connect, or challenge people with only oblique or tangential engagement with “the issue”. In fact, indirectness has been cultivated as an effective systems-based strategy for some contexts. Whether they are artist-based, community-based works or collective expressive forms, this report advocates for greater support for thoughtfully and ethically crafted creative initiatives that recognize the interdependence of all people with each other and with the natural world.

Many reports about the efficacy of artistic and culture-based initiatives prioritize outputs and outcomes, documenting the size of audiences and numbers of participants, improvements in academic grades, economic benefits to communities, reductions in recidivism rates, etc. While these quantifiable outcomes are significant, care must be taken to avoid the trap of over-instrumentalizing the arts, thus diminishing their transformative potential by focusing on goals that were established before creative processes even began. In this report, as “evidence” we offer descriptions of examples, and invitations to readers to engage with actual works of art. We believe that this approach explains and honors the distinctive transformative power of the arts. **We understand that we are inviting funders and policymakers into discourses that might be unfamiliar, different from what they might expect. We appreciate in advance readers’ willingness to engage with the vocabulary and the approach we offer, and look forward to the conversations that might emerge. We imagine such conversations as steps toward a culture of sustainability.**

### *Urgent calls for creative attention to complex challenges*

[This section draws from [“Key features of contemporary global challenges”](#) by Ameer Shaheed.]

The interconnected challenges confronting humankind and our planet -- the climate crisis and its multiple manifestations; gross inequalities based on colonial histories and on identities including race, caste, gender, sexual orientation or ability; unresolved legacies of violence; the rise of authoritarianism and polarization within societies; forced migration and displacement; violent extremism; the rapid loss of species, languages, musical traditions and entire cultures -- require urgent and creative attention. We must bring all of our faculties to bear on efforts to redirect the destructive trajectories these challenges represent.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a vivid and instructive part of the contemporary context that informs this report. Globally, as of the drafting of this report, the pandemic has resulted in the deaths of more than 4.2 million people; it is a challenge that affects the entire planet (Times, 2020).

The coronavirus spread throughout the world during a century that has witnessed unparalleled growth: in life expectancy, GDP, technological innovation, the percentage of people who have risen above extreme poverty and the percentage of people living in democracies (Shaheed, 2021b). Advances in technology and health-related research that pre-existed the pandemic facilitated the development and testing of highly effective vaccines at seemingly miraculous speed (Shaheed, 2021b), and allowed for sharing of information and resources. At the same time, the pandemic is shedding light on the stark and rising inequalities that mark global economic systems. Those inequalities (both within and between nation states) have made the disease and its related economic toll more deadly, and likely will continue to do so in coming months and years. Responses to the pandemic have in some cases worsened these inequalities and distrust.

A number of recent deadly viruses, possibly including COVID-19, have crossed over from animal species to human beings (Parrish et al., 2008). These cross-species infections reflect changing human land-use patterns and agricultural practices, patterns of consumption, and biodiversity loss and resource depletion, the confluence of which has forced wildlife into greater proximity to human communities.

Of course the pandemic is only one of a number of challenges confronting the world in the first quarter of the 21st century. These challenges are related to the environment, the economy, technology, human health, social dynamics and legacies of violent conflict (Shaheed, 2021b), as well as the loss of the world's cultures and languages (UNESCO, n.d.), and they all call for urgent constructive creative engagement.

The pandemic and other contemporary complex challenges illustrate the extent to which many such challenges confronting and created by humanity are interrelated. According to the transdisciplinary scholar Sacha Kagan, there is a pattern that underlies and links all contemporary complex global challenges: it is the dominance of a multi-faceted **culture of unsustainability**. The culture of unsustainability is based on dichotomous thinking (body vs. mind; state vs. market; nature vs. culture); it is dominated importantly by a way of understanding the world that values “purposive rationality”, rather than more holistic, embodied ways of knowing. This sort of reasoning focuses attention on what is needed for the survival of the individual organism; the knowledge, or wisdom, required for survival of the planet's ecosystems can be accessed in other ways: through dreams, art and ritual (Bateson, 1972). Analyses based on linear patterns of cause and effect are unable to account for the multiple mutual relationships characterizing complex interdependencies (between people and among humans and natural worlds) and their dynamics.<sup>4</sup>

Responses to the mutually interactive complex challenges that inscribe our twenty-first century world can both destroy and sustain human communities. Hope can be found in the emergence of a **culture of sustainability**. This culture incorporates local and global initiatives, many far from the centers of power, that are animated by relationships of reciprocity, times and spaces that nourish imagination

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<sup>4</sup> For detailed elaboration of Dr. Kagan's framework, see [“Toward Global \(Environ\)Mental Change: Transformative Art and Cultures of Sustainability,” Heinrich Boll Foundation, 2012.](#)

and creativity, and practices that invite qualities of presence required for building relationships of trust across generations and inequities of all kinds. Some artistic and cultural initiatives, including those referenced in this report, are already showing the way to nurturing a culture of sustainability.

For a more complete and nuanced discussion of this topic, see [“Key features of contemporary global challenges”](#) by Ameer Shaheed.

## *Systems-based approaches for aligning with Complexity in contemporary challenges*

[This section draws from [“Aligning practice with complexity”](#) by Emily Forsyth Queen.]

Humanity’s urgent challenges are characterized in part by their complexity -- in the sense that they involve “multiple actors, pursuing a multiplicity of actions and initiatives, at numerous levels of social relationships in an interdependent setting at the same time” (Lederach, 2005, p. 33). Complex challenges are of a different order than complicated challenges, where the desired outcome is more or less agreed-upon, and strategies to ameliorate problems can be devised, tested, implemented and refined. In contexts of complexity, “...there is both uncertainty, even among experts, about ‘best practices’ and little agreement among stakeholders about how the end results should look” (Baumgardner-Zuzik et al., 2018).

In order to understand why arts and cultural practices are uniquely well-suited to address complex challenges, it is important to understand the nature of complexity, and the characteristics of complex systems. These include **emergence** and **unpredictability**; complex challenges can best be navigated with the benefit of **systemic wisdom** and **embrace of multiple perspectives**.

Complex systems are characterized by **emergence**, whereby situations arise through the interaction of a number of actors and influences, without any particular intention to create those situations. As one example, when policy-makers instituted austerity measures in response to the 2008 economic crisis, no one intended to reduce supplies of protective gear which resulted in health workers being more vulnerable to a pandemic; but that was in fact an outcome.

Understanding the **unpredictability** and potential volatility of complex systems is important because these characteristics help explain why the usual conventions of program planning, applying for funding, securing approval from institutional review boards, and measuring outputs can be unhelpful in the context of complexity. Researchers in the field of urban studies put it this way:

*It is still assumed by many researchers that the ‘right’ way of conducting research is to pick research subjects according to algorithmic and rigorous criteria, cross checking dynamics and applying for ethical clearance and three to six months later, when the stamp of approval has been signed by all academic entities, and a researcher enters the proverbial field, everyone is already gone, everything is elsewhere...The reliability of post-Enlightenment rational research may be no match for rapidly shifting dynamics...and the affective, politically charged decisions people make within them... Research therefore needs to be more flexible, immediate and present... (Sitas, 2020).*

Rather than analyzing complex challenges at a distance, these qualities of rapid change and emergence require engaging with systems in order to understand them. In fact, effective approaches to complex challenges require what conflict transformation scholar/practitioner Peter Coleman (2018) refers to as **systemic wisdom**, or “the capacity to understand the inherent propensities of the complex, dynamic context that gives rise to an intractable conflict and to work with the dynamics of the system to support the emergence of more constructive patterns” (p.22). As Coleman explains, systemic wisdom is long-term, aims toward sustainability, is context- focused and non-linear. Those working with systemic wisdom at times may choose indirect methods that transform the dynamics of complex challenges toward more constructive patterns over longer periods of time.

A key to working in alignment with complexity is acknowledging and honoring **multiple perspectives**, then sensing the patterns that emerge in order to amplify desirable ones, disrupt undesirable ones, or seed new ones (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003).

Effective navigation of complex situations requires certain skills and capacities, such as having a strong grounding in ethics and values; building relationships of trust and trustworthiness across differences; embracing both ambiguity and paradox; and cultivating imagination and creativity, both in oneself and others.

According to Sacha Kagan, responding effectively to the complex nature of systems and challenges requires a sensitivity as much to antagonisms and competition as to complementarities and symbiosis. Contradictions must be acknowledged before they can reveal the deeper tension of antagonism and complementarity. Working with and in complex systems thus requires a sensibility to patterns that connect even seemingly contradictory elements. This process includes change agents locating themselves as contributors to complex challenges; this sensibility requires “self-critical reflexivity, i.e. a praxis of critique, that embraces the concrete and the abstract ” including knowledge derived from both theory and practice (Kagan, 2011, p. 2).

Currently the contributions of the creative sector to addressing complex challenges are inadequately understood, under-resourced, and/or funded through protocols that fail to acknowledge the complex challenges communities are facing. In most contexts, funds for arts and cultural initiatives are distributed through processes that are inconsistent with systems theory and the demands of complexity. They might include, for instance, procedures better aligned with complicated than complex challenges, such as detailed applications for short term funding, documentation of measurable outputs, and comparison of outputs and outcomes stated prior to the beginning of the project.<sup>5</sup>

The modes of understanding and engaging with the world made possible through artistic and cultural initiatives are uniquely well-suited to addressing complexity. Artistic and cultural processes can be crafted to encourage engagement directly and indirectly with complex systems in order to understand them; to increase curiosity about the paradoxical nature of phenomena that initially seem to be opposed; to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty that accompany rapid and unpredictable change; to

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<sup>5</sup> For more on this critical reflection on philanthropic challenges, please see Natalia Linares and Caroline Woolard, “Solidarity Not Charity: Arts and Culture Grantmaking in the Solidarity Economy -- a Rapid Report,” prepared for Grantmakers in the Arts from November 2020 - March 2021.

support constructive patterns and relationships that emerge; to discern patterns that connect; to engage in critical self-reflection; and, with adequate resources, to engage with communities over the long term.

For a more complete and nuanced discussion of this topic, see [“Aligning practice with complexity”](#) by Emily Forsyth Queen.

### *Toward ethical considerations for aligning creative processes with a culture of sustainability*

In order to contribute to a culture of sustainability, arts and cultural processes must be grounded in strong ethical commitments. By ‘ethical,’ we refer to processes that are animated by the ‘moral imagination,’ a concept from the conflict transformation field defined by John Paul Lederach as *the capacity which allows a person to simultaneously stay grounded in the troubles of the real world while also working toward a better one*. This approach to transforming conflict requires the practice of four disciplines: acknowledging interdependence, including the capacity of individuals and communities to imagine themselves in a web of relationships even with their enemies; the practice of paradoxical curiosity, inquiries into meanings of things that rise above the dualistic polarities in which conflicts are so often framed to locate greater truths by grappling creatively with seemingly contradictory truths; belief in the ubiquitous possibility of creativity, even in settings fraught with violence; the imagination of risk, including the willingness to step into the unknown (a daunting challenge particularly when what is known is ugly and violent) (Lederach, 2005).

By ‘ethical,’ we also refer to processes of transformation that prioritize respect for the integrity of those who are involved and who are changing. This builds on the conception of integrity elucidated by the feminist philosopher Victoria Davion, that even radical transformations can be consistent with integrity, when those who are changing bear witness to their own processes of transformation (Davion, 1991). Artistic and cultural processes can be crafted to support spaces for self-reflection, reinforcing the dimension of integrity in contexts of complexity.

The ethical sensibilities we advocate for also build on the ethical framework developed by [UNESCO’s Art Lab for Human Rights and Dialogue](#), which identified four overarching principles for ethical arts-based practices in communities in settings of precarity: enactment of measures of justice; integrity of collaborations; centrality of local knowledge and local creative forms; and attendance to care and social healing.

## **III. FINDINGS: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF ETHICAL ARTS AND CULTURAL PROCESSES**

Ethical artistic and cultural processes are many and diverse. From reconciliation rituals between Aboriginal people and descendants of settlers, to participatory community mural-making or theatre initiatives, to a solitary museum visit or poetry writing session, artistic and cultural processes engage us in ways of comprehending and acting in the world that are embodied, and that rely on senses and emotions in addition to rational cognition. They value insights from intuition and inspiration, and invite those who watch, listen or participate to meet the work halfway, entering into processes of collaborative meaning-making.

Whether fashioned by folk expressions “polished” by centuries of transmission from one generation to the next, or recently conceptualized, or the result of communities working in collaboration, or of individuals or ideas traveling across borders, creative works in all cultures issue **invitations** to engage. The invitation is to open oneself to the work, to attend to it and/or participate in it, and, importantly, to actively co-create the work’s meanings. Invitations to engage stand in contrast to expressions, forms and processes that are designed to manipulate, coerce or even convince.

When the forms of artistic and cultural productions and processes – for instance their textures, rhythms, colors, shapes, harmonies and dissonances -- align with our perceptual capacities and sensibilities, we generally enjoy an experience of beauty, an aesthetic experience. The word aesthetic derives from the Greek word meaning ‘sensory perception.’ For purposes of this paper, we define aesthetic experiences as those that align our cognitive, sensory, emotional and often spiritual faculties, an alignment we generally find both pleasurable and energizing.

In aesthetic experiences, interchanges are characterized by a quality of reciprocity in the sense that the work does not impose itself on the viewer or listener (as in propaganda or even argumentation), nor do witnesses impose pre-existing categories upon the work (as in analysis). This reciprocity establishes a relationship of mutual regard and respect, a kind of knowing that arises more typically in relationships between people than between people and inanimate things. Honoring interrelationships in this way is also aligned with complexity.<sup>6</sup>

Artistic and cultural productions and processes **affirm**, celebrate and embody qualities of interdependence and dignity. Recognition of interdependence with and responsibility for the natural world can be inspired, imagined and realized through participation in rituals and ceremonies, and through witnessing works that embody Indigenous and other cosmologies. Collaborative artistic and cultural productions of all kinds afford opportunities to strengthen awareness of interdependence and capacities required to act in accordance with the interdependence that inscribes our relationships.

In contexts where people’s sense of dignity has been beaten down, responses to complex challenges that fail to address such violations are unlikely to succeed. The beauty of artistic renditions of community stories, invitations to participate in meaning-making, opportunities to craft stories based on experiences -- these are some of the ways in which artistic and cultural productions can

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<sup>6</sup> In many languages, different words are used to refer to these two qualities of knowing. In Spanish, for instance, the word ‘conocer’ refers to knowing by virtue of an accumulation of information, and ‘saber’ implies a personal experience that leads to wisdom. One can know the percentage of salt in a solution of water; but one can only understand how salty water is by tasting it.



acknowledge, and in some cases, restore or amplify people's and communities' sense of dignity. On that basis, imagination and action are invigorated.

Artistic and cultural productions and processes can be crafted to create spaces that are **evocative**. They evoke feelings and explorations that lead to honest expressions, even in spaces where people are shut down and numbed. They engender capacities required to navigate contexts of complexity such as uncertainty, paradox and ambiguity.

The arts and other cultural productions and processes **unleash** individual and collective agency and creativity. Through such engagement, people and communities can give voice to their stories, including those that have been suppressed or repressed. Studios, rehearsal halls and the production of multiple drafts offer opportunities for gestures and ideas to be tried, critiqued, revised and shared. Possibilities that first emerge in our imaginations can be tested, refined and sometimes made real in the world. In the spaces of rehearsal and performance, drafting and redrafting, choreographing and revising, i.e. in spaces where mistakes are embraced as sources of learning, capacities to trust and to be trustworthy can grow. Communities can be supported to value what they know, and believe in themselves and their capacities to contribute to a better world. Through making music, for example, and creating together in other forms, people can feel their collective power and find the courage and commitment to act.

In contrast with the alienation, division, fear and mistrust too often engendered through political discourse and debate, the arts foreground awareness of human potential and creativity. Engaging through the arts also impresses upon us the ways in which we (as inquirers and creators) are linked to the subject of our inquiry and to the inquiry itself; all are part of the pattern that connects.

The transformative power of ethical artistic and cultural initiatives arises from all that they **invite, affirm, evoke and unleash**. Arts and cultural forms invite multiple ways of knowing, affirm and restore capacities, evoke reflection, and unleash experimentation. To address complexity, they can align with the particular contexts in which they operate, disrupting injurious dynamics and affirming dynamics that support cultures of sustainability.

The invitations, evocations, affirmations and unleashings associated with aesthetic experience are bound up with the transformative potential of nine interconnected and distinctive qualities of artistic and cultural engagement highlighted in this report: beauty and sensory perception (and the more-than-rational); interdependence and dignity; honesty, ambiguity and paradox; and agency and creativity.

### *Arts and cultural processes INVITE through beauty*

[This section draws from "[Engaging with beauty](#)" by Armine Avetisyan.]

Artistic and cultural processes can be crafted to issue invitations to pay attention, to open to new questions and new awareness, and to join in the construction of meaning. They do this through offering aesthetic experiences, experiences that can enliven, animate, call out to our humanness, our compassion, and our quest for justice. In this section on beauty, and the one that follows (on multiple modes of sense-making), we explore how aesthetic experiences are engendered through the quality of beauty, and through the simultaneous engagement of our senses, emotions, cognition and spiritual

faculties. Their invitations convey a sense of respect, a recognition of dignity and an embodiment of interdependence and the value of reciprocity. Aesthetic experiences invite transformation in which the integrity (Davion, 1991) of all who participate is honored and supported.

Through beauty, arts and cultural processes invite people to disrupt painful and damaging dynamics inherent in complex challenges, and to affirm restorative and healing dynamics.

The term ‘beauty’ carries interestingly different meanings in different cultures and languages. *Kugusu Mtima* (literally ‘to touch the heart’) is a Kiswahili conception that refers to the “power of a spiritual-emotional nature, which affects perception, thought and feeling....Self-consciously created phenomena...are expressions of powerful energies which act on reality and which act on us” (Richards, 1993, pp. 65-66). “Among the Yoruba, for example, the word Ashe is connected to iwa. iwa means ‘walked with ancestors’ and acquired critical discerning eyes. Oju-inu are important to iwa which is an inner eye or the insight of the artist or the external harmony of the artworks called oju-ona” (Beti, 2021, p. 2).

In the worldview of the Navajo, a Native American nation, disharmony exists when things are not as they should be. ‘Beauty’ describes the state of full harmony and peace, in which all aspects of the cosmos are in the proper relation to each other (Bluehouse & Zion, 1993).

Chinese theories also emphasize relations between nature and the human-made; many Chinese writings on aesthetics focus more on how artists cultivate their inner world than with the objects or performances that result from art practices.

*Rasa*, a key element of Indian aesthetic theories, refers to “the highest delight experienced by the soul” (Goswamy, 1991, p. 71). In the Indian artistic tradition everyone can be considered as a special kind of artist; art derives not from the ego-centered individual, but from the community (Kumar in Gablik, 1997).

In Islamic aesthetics, art, and particularly architecture, display beauty in representing the unity of spiritual and physical aspects of life.

The community arts movement<sup>7</sup> proposes that beauty is rooted in the relationships among the facilitating artists, the audience, and the material with which they are working. Beauty derives from the power of the energy among these three interacting elements (Shaheed, 2021c). Community arts practitioners create aesthetic spaces by arranging the elements of the processes of art-making.

Complex challenges often require us to pay attention to realities that are painful and, at the same time, to affirm the possibility of creating healing and life affirming realities. Artistic and cultural practices and productions can be crafted to support us to notice and attend to both kinds of realities. People living

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<sup>7</sup> Community arts is “a worldwide movement of artists and organizations who work with diverse communities in different contexts, driven by different (political or social) reasons, and from different (cultural) traditions. Reciprocal and equal relationships between all those involved are central (Kane & Ibrahimovic, 2021).”

under the shadow of complex challenges are often in need of nourishment, the restoration of capacities, and the resilience to imagine and work toward worlds different from the ones that surround them. The pleasure human beings derive from witnessing and creating beauty can support us as we face realities that are otherwise too difficult to bear; having the opportunity to craft one's story, no matter how painful the story is, or watching a sensitively wrought rendition of that narrative, can lead to healing, restoration of dignity, and the sense of agency required to reclaim one's life and community, and to move forward toward a vision of justice.

**[“Petals of Hope”](#)** - Artist Carole Kane initiated cross-community workshops after the bombing of Omagh in 1998, engaging over 150 people in the creation of pictures from paper which they crafted from flowers left in the town after a bombing. The images were given as gifts to families of survivors and shared in exhibitions and a book.

**[“Poetry Rains”](#)** - Since 2011 the Chilean art collective Casagrande has been organizing Poetry Rains projects in cities upon which bombs had been dropped at some point in their history. Warsaw, Berlin, Santiago de Chile, Dubrovnik, and Guernica have been locations for the performances so far. Hundreds of thousands of poems (in their local language) rain down over people in public places as a protest against war and violence.

In the case of Guernica, the first city ever to be bombed from the air, community participation for the event included oral history interviews with survivors and poetry-writing sessions. On the night of the ceremony, grandchildren sat on the shoulders of their grandparents, reaching up for poems as they descended from the sky. Now these images of raining poems will forever sit beside and, to some degree, balance memories and images of the falling bombs that devastated the community nearly a century before. City dwellers experience the sky as a source of beauty and shared joy. Of the thousands of poems that rained from the sky, all were gathered up; not a single one could be found on the ground the next morning.

Please watch this [two-minute video](#) of poems raining over Warsaw in 2009:

For more detail on the concepts of beauty mentioned here, as well as discussion of Western philosophical aesthetics, and more on the contributions of beauty to constructively addressing complex challenges, please see [“Engaging with beauty”](#) by Armine Avetisyan



100,000 poems rain down over the city of Guernica, Spain. Seventy Basque and Chilean poets composed pieces that were dropped on this city that had been almost completely destroyed in 1937 by Nazi forces allied with Francisco Franco. Residents balance a traumatic history of the experience of air bombardment with the ability, now, to look to a sky that brings them **beauty** instead. (Chilean art collective Casagrande; 2004)

### *Arts and cultural processes INVITE multiple modes of sense-making*

[This section draws from [“The mind on art: cognitive functions and states associated with aesthetic engagement”](#) by Dr. Ameer Shaheed]

In complex challenges requiring systemic wisdom, multiple narratives and epistemologies must be engaged in non-linear ways that disrupt the damaging patterns of a culture of unsustainability. Aesthetic engagement invites modes of attention, perception and understanding that “complement and go beyond what is commonly understood by ‘rational reasoning’” or “purposive rationality,” as Gregory Bateson refers to it (Shaheed, 2021b, p.3).

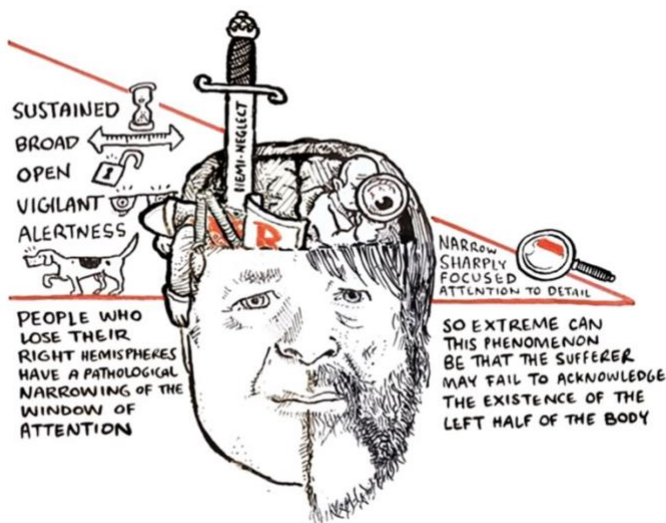
Engaging with the arts spans the ‘rational’ and ‘supra’- or ‘trans’-rational, involving a wide range of cognitive functions and states that extend and complement our abilities to make sense of the world and generate knowledge. Three major qualities are discussed here. The first pertains to art as ‘sensate’ knowledge, and examines the embodied, emotional, and empathic processes involved in aesthetic experience. The second concerns ‘creative thinking’: idea-generating processes that are both novel and useful or appropriate. It involves a combination of focused and dreamlike states, convergent and divergent processes, and includes non-linear processes of accessing and generating information, ideas, and solutions. These processes can invoke intuition, inspiration, and insight, which are linked to different mental states such as flow. Third, aesthetic experience also can involve distinctive ways of making sense of the world and understanding -- such as holistic appreciation, implicit understanding, and storytelling -- that cannot be captured in explicit, propositional or discursive terms. This includes metaphor – a type of implicit symbol – and narrative, which are frequently invoked and evoked through engagement with the arts, inviting collaborative ways of attaching or constructing meaning to experiences.

These various faculties are ultimately mediated through the different kinds of attention and awareness invited by the aesthetic experience; in turn, the kind of attention we pay to the world determines what

we see and how we engage with it. This is supported by studies of the human brain examining how the right and left hemisphere “impart two distinct ways of attending to the world that provide us with different forms of knowledge and understanding...[w]hile the left hemisphere is an essential tool for analysis, the right, though ‘silent’, is the key to synthesis; it is where we derive the fullest, most holistic appreciation of understanding and meaning”. The right hemisphere is central to many aspects of aesthetic engagement, and “people with regular artistic and creative practices have less pronounced differences in hemispheric dominance” (McGilchrist, 2019).

Artistic and cultural processes invite us into experiences of the aesthetic: to perceive and act on the world by simultaneously engaging and aligning our cognitive, sensory, emotional and spiritual powers. Aesthetic engagement can thus contribute to addressing complex, systemic, divergent global problems through relational, contextual, holistic understanding and insightful, creative approaches that can go beyond linear approximations. Sensate, embodied understanding invites qualities of attention and knowing into problem spaces that can help us have greater empathy for each other, the environment, and engage with living systems. These qualities differ from those that emerge from other modes of engagement, such as political debate or scholarly analysis or big data. This wider range of approaches can help us challenge, question, and re-interpret / re-write dominant narratives.

For a more complete and nuanced discussion of this topic, see [“The mind on art: cognitive functions and states associated with aesthetic engagement”](#) by Dr. Ameer Shaheed.



This illustration is from the video, *The Divided Brain*, which explores how human beings employ **multiple modes of knowing**. We see things in context, understand implicit meaning, as well as metaphor, body language, and emotional expression, while also contending with the rational (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFs9WO2B8ul>).

### *Arts and cultural processes AFFIRM dignity*

[This section draws heavily on [“Initial thoughts about the relationship between the arts and the affirmation of human dignity”](#) by Dr. Toni Shapiro-Phim]

“Humanity dignifies, restores and reimagines itself through creating, performing, preserving and revising its cultural and artistic life.” -- Karima Bennoune, special rapporteur on cultural rights, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020.

Dignity, in the ways artists and those involved with arts-based initiatives often conceptualize it, is the core of our humanity. It's as if without dignity, we wither. A sense of dignity registers within ourselves and in our relationships, flourishing in the bonds or connections we forge as members of communities, however defined. Affirming human dignity equates with affirming one's own and/or other people's humanity, the possibility to freely and safely access resources, and partake in full citizenship. Not to exist at the whim, and for the material and political benefit, of others. Not to be exploited. Not to live in constant danger of isolation, displacement, disenfranchisement and/or violence. Not to have certain choices proscribed by exile, war, or political, social and economic systems.

Whether it is in a studio, museum, storefront or refugee camp, or in a theater or on the streets, in the midst or aftermath of violent conflict, in the face of grave inequality or blinding poverty, processes that restore and affirm dignity contribute to "social healing" as discussed by John Paul Lederach and Jill Lederach (2011). They allow for and nurture the presence of individuals in their full, complex identities, and allow for and nurture the (re)telling of narratives from the perspective of those placed in most precarity by complex challenges that confront them. Without that perspective, solutions are unlikely to make a positive difference in those individuals' and communities' lives. Without the affirmation of human dignity, chances for violence escalate. The affirmation of human dignity deepens connection to place, meaning and one another. It's through those connections that our sense of mattering, of importance, and of the mattering of others, comes into being.

As an example, "*Phka Sla Krom Angkar*, a moral and collective reparations project of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, Cambodia, is an initiative that involved a traveling exhibition, a documentary film and archived oral history interviews, a dance drama, and psychosocial support. The focus of the project was acknowledgement of the experiences of survivors of forced marriage (institutionalized rape) under the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, and some redress, as forced marriage was newly classified as a crime against humanity during the trial of some of the Khmer Rouge senior leaders. The redress involved, in part, having their experiences honored publicly through a performance of some of their stories in venerated art forms— classical Cambodian dance and *pin peat* music – art forms that connect Cambodians to spiritual, geographic, historical and other communities. It was, in some ways, an invitation to belonging and a rejection of labels of shame and tarnishment" (Shapiro-Phim, 2020).

As evidenced by the arts and cultural processes in this section, the affirmation of dignity disrupts oppressive dynamics and supports relationships, processes and projects that are restorative and enlivening.

Please see "[Initial thoughts about the relationship between the arts and the affirmation of human dignity.](#)" for powerful and diverse examples that focus on creative approaches to the complex challenges of gender-based violence, displacement, authoritarianism, inequality and racial injustice.



Dancers interpret the testimony of survivors of forced marriage (institutionalized rape), a practice imposed during the years of Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. By both allowing artists to retell their deeply harrowing and sometimes triumphant histories, and contributing input as the performance piece - Phka Sla - was being developed, survivors report beginning to reclaim their **dignity** after decades of suffering fear, shame and feelings of worthlessness. (Sophiline Arts Ensemble; Sophiline Cheam Shapiro, choreographer; Noboyuki Arai, photographer; 2018)

### *Arts and cultural processes AFFIRM interdependence*

[This section draws heavily on [“Interdependence”](#) by Dr. Polly O. Walker, Director of the Baker Institute for Peace and Conflict Studies, Juniata College, and Chair, Indigenous Education Institute.]

Arts and cultural processes address complex challenges through affirming dynamics that acknowledge and support interdependence while, at the same time, disrupting the dynamics that attempt to elide or suppress that very interdependence. Both Western and Indigenous scholars stress interdependence among humans as a central and essential aspect of conflict transformation.

A number of Western scholars maintain that ceremony and ritual heighten awareness of the interconnected aspects of one’s experience. For example, Driver (1992) analyzes ceremony and ritual as holistic processes that integrate “the psychological, the sociopolitical, and the material worlds” (p. 175). And according to Schirch (2007), ritual involves the integration of “people’s minds, bodies, all or many of their senses, and their emotions” (p. 157). Western scholars of performance studies also illuminate ways in which ceremony and ritual enhance awareness of interdependence across differences in social groups.

Many Indigenous peoples also understand ceremony as heightening awareness of interdependence. However, their concepts include an extensive network of relationships within which ceremony acknowledges and revitalizes interrelatedness with the natural world, too, as McMaster & Trafzer (2004) explain: “Among many different Indian peoples... holy rituals keep the Earth alive and moving. The grass grows and rivers flow... We sing our songs, perform our dances, and pray. In many ways we remember the old traditions, and by telling our stories of being, we re-enter and renew our sacred circles. With each song, story or ceremony, the Native world is recreated, linking the present with the past. In so

doing, we bring ourselves into the larger circle of Indian people, nurtured by sweet medicine that lives today. Native Americans stand in the center of a sacred circle, in the middle of four directions. At this time and for all time, American Indians are in the presence of, and part of, many vast, living, and diverse Native universes” (p. 44).

Processes of creating and witnessing artistic and cultural productions offer many opportunities to experience our interdependence and to strengthen capacities to move gracefully and productively in contexts of interdependent relationships. Theatrical works, television broadcasts, festivals, and museum installations, for example, all demand cooperation in their production, and offer opportunities to hone skills of listening, responding, as well as increasing awareness of dynamics and context, and so on.

The award-winning art installation “Teeter-totter” is an example of an arts initiative that addresses the complex challenges of inequality, dislocation, and border closings. It is a bright pink seesaw installed on a section of Trump’s border wall that bisects Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, and El Paso, Texas, in the United States. Although it was a decade in the making, the teeter-totter was only allowed to remain in place for 30 minutes because the US Border Patrol refused permission for its installation. Set up in the dark of night, the see-saw was ready at first light, with people showing up to play on the Mexican side where communities pressed against the wall. “Teeter-totter” both embodies interdependence and creates a metaphor for the interdependent relationships between people on both sides of the border: Just as the physical actions of a teeter totter depend on the actions of people on both ends of it, justice for those living near the border requires addressing the fact that “actions that take place on one side have a direct consequence on the other” (Barajas, 2019, para. 14).

Many Indigenous peoples around the world are engaged in arts and cultural processes that affirm their interdependence with others and with the natural world, disrupting systems of coloniality that prioritize independence. As Dr. Walker writes in her memo,

*Many Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island (North America) embody interdependence with the natural world in their movements to address the ongoing violence of settler colonialism. Visual art, music, poetry, ceremony and many other forms of art and cultural work are being engaged by Indigenous women to honor interdependence, to bring others’ awareness to the ways in which disrespect of this vast network of relationships is making individuals, communities and the natural world out of balance. A seminal work in this area is a compilation of Indigenous women’s writings edited by Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo (1998), *Re-Inventing the Enemy’s Language*, which illuminates the structural and cultural violence of settler colonialism’s disregard for Indigenous people’s webs of relatedness. Artists from a range of Native nations describe the violence wrought by disrespect of interrelatedness with the natural world: of apocalyptic environmental destruction, endangerment of entire populations of animal relatives, disregard of Indigenous women and their roles, as well as marginalization and oppression of Indigenous worldviews.*

*More recently, Mojave Nation poet Natalie Diaz (2020) published a compilation of postcolonial love poems, one of which describes the embodiment of eco-relationality and the role in conflict transformation of acknowledging interdependence : “I carry a river. It is who I am. ‘Aha Makav. This is not metaphor” (Diaz, 2020, p. 46). In many Indigenous worldviews, destruction of parts of*



*the natural world constitutes genocide toward the Indigenous peoples so intimately connected with the natural world. Diaz' poem grapples with the possibilities of conflict transformation should a more respectful engagement with interdependence be evidenced by settlers: "If I could convince you, would our brown bodies and our blue rivers be more loved and less ruined?" (p. 51).*

*Poetry and narrative, such as that of Diaz (2020) and the many authors in Bird and Harjo (1998), have the aesthetic power to arrest the readers' attention long enough for them to engage with concepts of interdependence that are essential to transforming violence toward Indigenous peoples, and that may be vastly different from dominant Western worldviews of those in power in settler colonial countries. Often the worldview blindness of those in dominant groups (Goldberg, 2009) obscures that which is of vital importance to peoples in oppressed groups.*

The affirming of both interdependence and dignity can be witnessed in [Arctic Culture and Climate, an exhibition of the British Museum](#). The Indigenous communities of the Arctic region are filled with artists and culture bearers, people who have created works of enormous utility and stunning beauty for tens of thousands of years as they survived and thrived in harmony with their frigid, yet abundant, environment. Their systematic observations and reciprocal relationships with the natural world characterize Indigenous science. The British Museum engages with this science with honor and respect. Traditionally, indigenous peoples relied on the bounty of animals both in the sea and on the land. They survived sustainably with their environment in part by acknowledging interdependence, harnessing every element of the creatures they revered. People relied on cultural knowledge about the patterns of weather and natural cycles, and understood themselves to be part of the ecosystem within which they thrived.

For instance, skilled seamstresses used gutskins and bone needles to create beautiful, waterproof, warm parkas, which allowed for safe mobility for young and old. For mothers of small children, they crafted parkas with extra large hoods, so mothers could safely and conveniently carry their babies on their backs. They made practical use of their intimate knowledge of the environment: what kinds of fur don't retain water, and therefore can be used in parts of parka's hoods that touch skin; what temperatures are best for tanning hides; how to carve needles that are sturdy enough to pierce multiple layers of animal hide; how skins and stitching patterns can be fashioned into boots that ensure traction on slippery surfaces.

Stunning parkas are only a few of the items included in the visual and auditory feast that awaits visitors to ["Arctic Culture and Climate"](#), still available for viewing online. It is impossible to engage with the beautiful parkas, tools, jewelry, bags, kayaks, masks, sleds, etc., without appreciating the creativity of the Indigenous Arctic peoples, their embrace of the interdependence of the human and natural worlds, and the dignity with which they embrace their cultures and the resilience with which they are facing the challenges posed to those ways of life by the changing climate.

The voices of the peoples of the Arctic, along with their beautiful creations, are compellingly presented in the exhibition that was developed through multi-year collaborations between the museum and Arctic communities. "It told the powerful story of respectful relationships with icy worlds and showed how Arctic Peoples have harnessed the weather and climate to thrive." ([Arctic Culture and Climate](#), on-line presentation by the British Museum) In vivid and viscerally compelling ways, the exhibition and related

events highlight the dramatic loss of ice and erratic weather caused by climate change, and how these changes are putting unprecedented pressure on the capacities for adaptation, innovation and collaboration that are hallmarks of traditional and contemporary ways of life of the peoples of the Arctic.

The transformative power of arts and culture are embodied as much in the process of developing the exhibition as in the product of the exhibition. The process allowed its creators to strengthen one of the most important capacities for working with complex challenges: the capacity to build relationships of trust across differences, especially differences in power, worldviews and access to resources.

[“Magnetic North: Voices from the Indigenous Arctic”](#) is one among several films that accompany this exhibition. It features an unforgettable dancer, powerful storytellers and poets, heartbreaking images of ice melting and breaking, and young Inuit people affirming their culture and their commitment to activism to stop global warming. The youth of Arctic communities are calling for global action informed by the same spirit of reciprocity that informed their communities’ relationships with the natural world: a world and a set of relationships that are being altered, irrevocably.

*Inuksuks* are human-made stone landmarks, large constructions created by placing and balancing stone upon stone. Traditionally they may have been used for navigation, to mark places of hunting, fishing or food caches. They might have signaled sites of veneration. In what seems an act of extraordinary cultural generosity, Pita Irniq, an Inuit *inuksuk* builder, discusses the significance of the *inuksuk* as a symbol of survival, and the process of building one in the museum in London. Please listen to him describe his work and its meaning in a [3-minute video](#), *Piita Irniq making this Inuksuk, 2019*. Scroll down past the still image of the construction to the youtube video.

Both the remarkable aesthetic and ethical traditions of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, and the thoughtful politically and culturally sensitive exhibition at the British Museum embody the value of reciprocity. As paradoxical as it may seem at first to celebrate the dignity and the resilience of Indigenous communities in a cultural temple of a colonial power, in a way it is fitting, because it is precisely the museum-goers of London who need to come face to face with the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic. The exhibition invites its visitors to open themselves in a heartfelt way, to pay attention to the stories and the beauty of the Indigenous peoples of the Arctic and their creative works, and to the devastating damage already inflicted on the environments that have sustained their cultures over tens of thousands of years. In the process, this exhibition reaches beneath visitors’ defenses, inviting visitors to recognize and celebrate the dignity of the Indigenous people of the arctic and to acknowledge complicity in and the ways they have benefited from the systems that have created and perpetuated a culture of unsustainability.

For more examples and reflections, please see [“Interdependence”](#) by Dr. Polly O Walker.



Arctic peoples' views and lived experiences, as expressed and presented in the exhibition Arctic: Culture and Climate, affirm the **interdependence** of humankind and the natural world. They also give the rest of us a push to consider, together, how to counter climate change and its destructive impact, given such interdependence. Inupiat Elder Delano Barr talks about the situation in Shishmaref, Alaska (USA): "When everything started changing due to global warming, oh boy! That messed up

### *Arts and cultural processes EVOKE emotional complexity and honesty*

[This section draws on conversations among the researchers and thought partners, and also on ["Fostering honesty, disruption and exploration: starting points"](#) by Jasmina Ibrahimovic and Carole Kane.]

*Aesthetic forms and processes engage us emotionally, spiritually and through our senses, as well as cognitively. It is partly because of this embodiment, a defining feature of the engagement with the arts, that the feelings, beliefs, sensibilities and truths that are under the surface can be 'unveiled', reached and worked with (personal communication with John Paul Lederach, December 17, 2020).*

People and communities living in the shadow of many interconnected complex challenges often experience a numbing of emotions, which limits the ability to engage creatively with those challenges. Ethical artistic and cultural processes can be crafted to reanimate people who have faced trauma.

In addition, systems-based approaches to complex challenges call for aptitudes that include emotional and behavioral complexity (Coleman, 2018) which can be seen in the works in this section. The Northern Ireland artist Carole Kane offers an example of the workings of community arts processes, and her role as an expressive arts facilitator:

*...in an initial phase of a creative public consultation for a memorial to be placed at an unmarked baby plot at Belfast City Cemetery. An important part of this process involved making pieces of hand-made paper. The "awakening" or sharpening of the senses, stirred an internal resonance, and reconnected people with a sense of experience that had laid dormant for some time. My role as facilitating artist was to stand alongside the community and the exploration of their artmaking process. Anticipating an element of awakening or connection to take place, it was also my aesthetic responsibility to welcome or point it out when it happened – the invitation to empathy and honesty. This enlivened the artist/practitioners. They re-connected with self and each other.*

*This community arts/Expressive Arts<sup>8</sup> interaction became a very necessary rehumanizing, life-giving experience (Kane & Ibrahimovic, 2021, p.5).*

Jasmina Ibrahimovic describes how a performance, and the discussion that followed, offered space for honest expression, understanding, reflection and a nudge toward moral imagination:

*In our online youth performance Niet Tuchten, and the discussions with young people about it, I see that we try to reward honesty, even if this is in contrast with our norms and values. In the performance, we follow the stories of 8 boys, told by 1 narrator. At the end of the performance, the main character / narrator decides to commit murder to regain respect for his mother who has been ridiculed by the person that he shot. For most people/adults, disrespecting someone's mother is far from a good reason to shoot someone. But for young people who find themselves in a masculine street culture in the poorer suburbs of Rotterdam, losing respect sometimes means death.....Often young people we speak with understand the murder that the character in the performance commits and say they would do the same in his situation. For us - and the teacher in question - it is important in such a case not to react negatively to the perspective of the young people (which they would otherwise never talk about in class), but we try to understand where it comes from, reflect with them on their choice and navigate to alternative responses. The fact that we do not want to change the young people at that time also gives openness to tell the story (Kane & Ibrahimovic, 2021, p. 12).*

For a trailer of this performance, see [Niet Tuchten](#). For a more complete and nuanced discussion of this topic, see "[Fostering honesty, disruption and exploration: starting points](#)" by Jasmina Ibrahimovic and Carole Kane.



**Honesty** emerges from the online theatrical production of Niet Tuchten at Rotterdam's Wijk Theater and facilitated follow-up discussions as young men reveal to each other and to the workshop leaders their relationships to violence, thus opening possibilities for explorations of alternatives to aggression. (Still from the production trailer; <https://www.rotterdamswijktheater.nl/productie/niet-tuchten/>; 2021)

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<sup>8</sup> [Expressive Arts](#) is a discipline of helping and healing that uses the arts as its basis for discovery and change.

## *Arts and cultural processes EVOKE capacities needed to negotiate ambiguity*

[This section draws heavily on [“Negotiating ambiguity, nuance, and uncertainty: a view from Colombia,”](#) by Dr. Ángela Pérez Mejía, Chief Cultural Manager, Banco de la República, Colombia]

Tolerance for ambiguity is a central aspect of systems-based approaches to complex challenges. Research documents the ways that, in contexts of continued violence, the language and images of dominant discourses tend to be inadequate to capture and convey the ambiguities and subtleties of people’s experiences. Victims’ perspectives are often invisible in news reporting and historical accounts, and language becomes polarized, as evidenced in the media and social networks. Such polarization renders empathy and new creative frameworks much more difficult.

In a project sponsored by the Banco de la República called *Let Peace Speak Up*, children worked with poet Javier Naranjo to write their versions of peace and war. A 7-year-old boy writes: “Peace is my family” while a 10-year-old girl writes: “My family is war”... “The children’s stories reflect situations of overlapping sexual violence, armed attacks on their territories, social and economic violence exerted on their families, and the forced recruitment feared by so many....[T]he symbolic and extended language of poetry leaves space for the simultaneous representation of multiple levels of conflict and the complexity of the situation” (Pérez Mejía, 2021, p. 4)

In another example, the Banco de la República invited a group of transgender women to visit the bank’s museums and learn about the collection in the company of experts. After weeks of exploration, the women

*were invited to stage a performance in front of an artwork with which they especially identified. The result, exhibited to the general public, was aesthetically superb in the sophistication of the interpretations and the quality of the performances. The interpretations were nourished by the transgressive women's performance skills; the same skills, in fact, that lead society to marginalize and abuse them. The reversal of positions of authority proved transformative for them, for the museum staff, and for the general public. Especially impressive was Daniela Maldonado's performance in front of a baroque painting of a dead nun crowned with flowers (characteristic of Spanish-American colonial art). Dressed beautifully and crowned also with fresh flowers, she explained that the thing she felt closest to was a nun: “... we are both defined by our dress, can trust only our sisters, and we will die alone –hopefully with some flowers.” Maldonado achieved her ambiguous representation thanks to the space provided by a baroque work from a distant time and different conditions, but capable of accommodating the complex and baroque life of a person in her circumstances, which allowed her to provide an unexpected explanation and name herself from a new place in the world (Pérez Mejía, 2021, p. 4).*

In reflecting on these and other examples, Dr. Pérez Mejía concludes that “artistic languages make it possible to recover places of enunciation seized by destruction and to initiate new, complex stories that clear the confused memory and give rise to disinterested relationships with room to listen to the other, and that, above all, help communities, with all their differences and contradictions, agree upon a path toward reparation. It may be that, instead of the often unattainable virtues of acceptance and

forgiveness, our recognition of the ambiguity of our experience and the hope of building in the midst of uncertainty are what make it possible for us to embark on the paths of transformation that lead beyond the condition of victims and perpetrators to being part of a forward-looking community.”

For a more complete and nuanced discussion of this topic, see [“Negotiating ambiguity, nuance, and uncertainty: a view from Colombia”](#) by Dr. Ángela Pérez Mejía, Chief Cultural Manager, Banco de la República, Colombia.



As part of the project *Un lugar en el mundo* (A Place in the World), transgender women in Bogotá, Colombia, embrace and publicly celebrate the **ambiguity** of their position, simultaneously inside and outside of mainstream society, by placing themselves in relationship to other “extraordinary” women – nuns venerated in spectacular portraits on the walls of the Museums of the Banco de la República. (Portrait of Daniela Maldonado; Liliana Parra, photographer; Sebastián Mesa, art direction; copyright Banco de la República; 2018)

### *Arts and cultural processes EVOKE paradoxical curiosity*

[This section draws heavily from [“Embracing paradox and contradiction”](#) written by Dr. Ameer Shaheed and informed by notes from Dr. Dagmar Reichert, an expert in the field of art in conflict mediation and managing director of ArtasFoundation for Peace.]

What is the value of embracing paradox and contradiction? How does this capacity relate to aesthetic engagement, and how can discerning the paradoxical nature of things and maneuvering within such situations help us address complex global challenges?

Paradox can be defined in several ways, including: “a statement contrary to common belief....a statement self-contradictory in fact, and hence necessarily false, and finally ...a statement that seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd, although it may be true in fact” (Ackermann, 1991). The last part of this definition is particularly important to note: paradoxes do not imply falsehoods – indeed they can be highly revelatory. Thinkers from different eras and regions have identified paradox as an indicator of the limits of logical thought, and a pathway to discover new – often deeper – perspectives to a given question. Paradox often points to critical tensions between opposing poles (tradition/innovation,

public/private, freedom/discipline, stability/change, etc.), and leads the way to discovering new levels of truth that can reconcile the tension, a new synthesis.

Many of society's challenges are complex precisely because they are understood by different parties in the light of contradictory and competing narratives. Cultivating curiosity about the paradoxical nature of such apparent contradictions is an important way in which arts and cultural initiatives can contribute constructively to addressing complex challenges.

An example of such an initiative is *A Passion for Life: Stories and Folk Arts of Palestinian and Jewish Women*, sponsored by the Boston-area (USA) Oral History Center in the late 1980s. At its center was an exhibition that displayed text of the stories of eight Jewish and Palestinian women then living in eastern Massachusetts, along with objects of folk expression, such as baskets, embroidered dresses, family photographs, and cooking utensils. Public events preceded and accompanied the exhibition; these ranged from sessions of sharing recipes, songs, dance and visual arts to a theoretical discussion on the role of folk arts in communities in crisis and a workshop on challenging stereotypes of Arab and Jewish people.

The project was coordinated by me (Cynthia Cohen) as oral historian, in collaboration with Feryal Abbasi Ghnaim, a traditional Palestinian embroiderer. We both served on the project's Directions Committee, which wrote at the time that we "were looking for modes of expression that would invite people in conflict to reach beneath their defenses and their fears, so they could come to recognize each other's humanity" (Cohen, 1994, p. 197). One of the questions raised by the initiative was: "How can we nourish in ourselves and in others the capacity to listen to the story of the other and to simultaneously hold in view two (or more) conflicting and competing narratives?" (Cohen, 1994, p. 198).

The conversations that surrounded the construction of the exhibition and the planning of events offered the diverse team of project organizers many opportunities to confront the contradictions inherent not only in their socio-political reality, but also in the initiative itself. The project nearly fell apart on several occasions, sometimes as we encountered the different and emotionally-laden meaning of terms such as 'peace,' 'justice,' '1948' and 'The Holocaust.' The very real asymmetries that characterize the conflict were in tension with the balance we sought in the project. Our encounters with these contradictions were often very painful, but they deepened our understanding of each other's worldviews and our own capacities to communicate sensitively and respectfully.

The potential of art symbols to transcend conflicting narratives impressed itself in a particularly difficult moment of the project. After a week of challenging encounters surrounding references to the Holocaust, Feryal and I were presenting at an open house. She showed her beautiful tapestry of a Palestinian woman in traditional dress holding aloft a dove. In its beak was an envelope carrying this message, which clarified that she was referring to the kind of "peace which comes from understanding a people's suffering, sitting down with them to genuinely solve and resolve their problems, so that justice and equality can be the code of the land." The message concluded, "I smuggled my dreams in my hidden wishes and crossed the ocean in hope for peace; for my Palestinian sisters who lost their children in wars and who have been widowed at an early age. I ask you for true peace for my people."

I followed Feryal by reading an excerpt from the extraordinary autobiography of Heda Margolius Kovaly. She identifies three forces that “carved the landscape of her life” in Prague from 1941 through 1968. The first was Adolf Hitler; the second was Joseph Stalin. “The third was very small and weak, and actually invisible. It was a shy little bird hidden in my rib cage....Sometimes in the most unexpected moments the bird would wake up, lift its head, and flutter its wings in rapture. Then I too would lift my head because, for that short moment, I would know for certain that love and hope are infinitely more powerful than hate and fury, and that, somewhere beyond the line of my horizon there was life indestructible....The little bird, the third force, kept me alive to tell the story.”

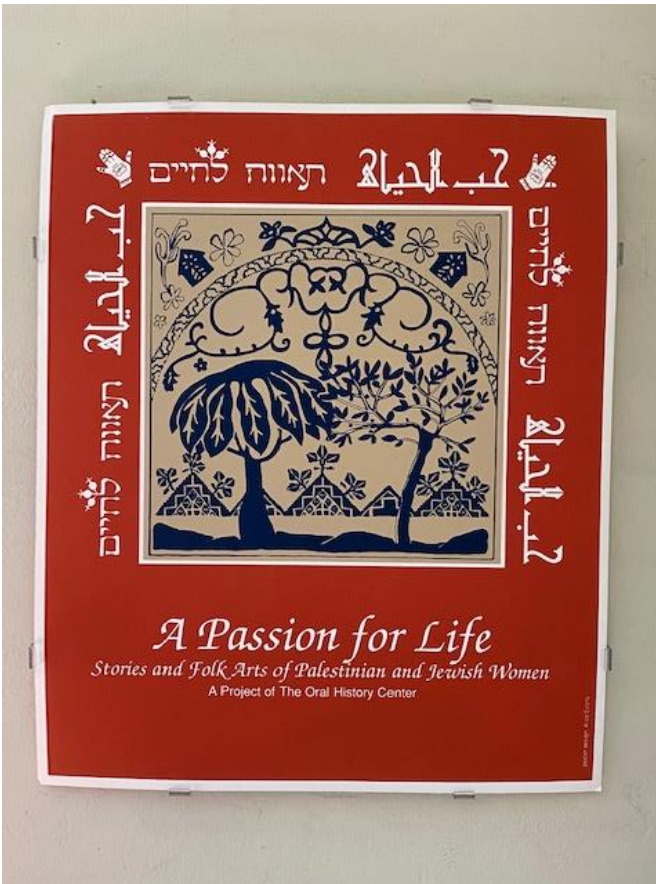
When I finished reading Kovaly’s words, Feryal leaned over and pointed to the dove in her tapestry. “You see,” she whispered, “It’s the same bird” (Cohen, 1994, pp. 197–233).

Arts engagement can raise sensitivity to contradictions and tensions in the individual and society, helping represent them back to the world artistically, and employing creative and relational thinking to find higher-level syntheses that transcend polarities. Artists can be highly sensitive to the contradictions and tensions that – when viewed through logical frameworks and concepts – are paradoxical. They can invite themselves and others into awareness of the tensions that exist in paradoxical systems or situations, whether in nature, in society, or within the individual. Being able to step out of the realm of logical reasoning for at least part of the process, they can work through polarities and contradictions with metaphor and symbols, and represent them back to their participants and/or audiences creatively. The arts also can be crafted to layer several meanings into a single image or story or soundscape, superimposing seemingly contradictory ideas, perspectives, or narratives which can be perceived in relation to one another.

Thus, embracing paradox and contradiction is an important capacity that can give insight into our inner and outer worlds, and help navigate complex challenges, revealing tensions in systems that exist at an individual and collective level. The arts involve and encourage sensitivities to tensions and polarities, and allow us to represent them symbolically, rendering their contradictory and paradoxical nature explicit.

For a more complete and nuanced discussion of this topic see [“Embracing paradox and contradiction”](#) written by Dr. Ameer Shaheed, and informed by notes from Dr. Dagmar Reichert.





The collectively-written project statement of the oral history initiative, *A Passion for Life: Stories and Folk Arts of Palestinian and Jewish Women*, says, in part, “We bring these stories together in one exhibition not to suggest any simple parallels, but to create a vision broad enough to embrace them all. How can this fragile fabric of our lives, which we and our mothers and grandmothers have stitched so carefully – note by note, spoonful by spoonful, caress by caress, story by story – be so brutally torn to shreds?” The project (among women in the USA) cultivated curiosity about the **paradoxes** before the women: the contradictory nature of their separate perspectives and narratives existing alongside each other, and this tension alongside their shared quest for alternatives to hostility, distrust, violence and injustice.

### *Arts and cultural processes UNLEASH agency*

[This section draws heavily on [“Invoking and inviting agency”](#) by [Dr. Mary Ann Hunter](#), Assistant Dean, College of Arts, Law and Education, University of Tasmania]

The unleashing of agency is a primary source of art’s transformative power to address complex challenges. Without agency, no measure of transformative personal, social or political change seems possible. But what do we mean by agency?

The concept of agency has been understood in several different ways. From Western Enlightenment thinking, agency is understood in relation to the individual: their will, capacity, and choice to act, bringing individual autonomy and self-determination to the fore. This definition has often ignored the ways in which a person’s class, race, gender or caste can restrict their capacity to act. The ‘structuration approach’ to agency addresses this limitation, by bringing attention to the dynamic relationship between individuals and societies. Faced with constraints, agents can ‘undertake action through the very structures which constrain them, reproducing those or changing those structures in creative ways....’ (Page & Petray, 2016, p. 89). Amartya Sen makes a direct link between agency and freedom in his well-known strength-based capabilities framework. “...[A] person’s capability to *do, be and/or achieve* that which they value, constitutes their freedom” (Sen, 1993).

Contemporary conceptions of agency value relationality and interdependence, and allow for the vitality of non-human and more-than-human agency. “Agency is enacted in encounters and experiences in the present....In this posthumanist approach, the concept of agency and action toward change can be affective, situated and embodied as much as it is cognitive” (Nicholson, 2016, pp. 250–252).

Art works and stories can be understood to have agency as well. Tim Ingold writes that agents are the storymakers, bringing past, present and future in one. Examples that illustrate the various ways that artistic and cultural initiatives can embody and engender agency abound throughout this report and the memos attached.

Agency can be understood in relation to artists, communities, and audiences. While the arts can’t *make* people change, engagement with and through the arts can cultivate the conditions for agential experience and action. Creativity is impossible without agency.

Although engaging in the arts can cultivate the conditions for both practicing and unleashing agency, not all arts endeavours necessarily seek to do so (for example, art purely intended for entertainment.) Ethical arts and cultural practices, with their embodied, embedded, relational and affective capacities, can be crafted to enable their creators, participants and audiences to encounter complexity in ways that go beyond linear, ideologically static or results-focussed engagement....They can do so by making the familiar unfamiliar, mobilising meaning-making informed by generations past, and animating people and communities to new learnings about themselves, others and the natural systems of which they are a part.

Unleashing agency is a central theme of 350 Pacific, “a youth-led grassroots network engaging communities in the Pacific Islands to fight the climate crisis. 350 Pacific works with organizers across 17 Pacific Island nations and diaspora communities....to highlight the vulnerabilities of our island countries to climate change while showcasing our strength and resilience as a people.” (*Matagi Mālohi*, n.d.)

350 Pacific embodies aspects of the traditional cultures of the peoples of the Pacific Islands as they animate and organize young people to imagine, plan and implement bold actions “not only to protect our future but to protect our past.” Drawing on the spiritual force embodied in traditions of boat-making and navigating, traditional dress and song, in 2014 a flotilla of South Pacific climate activists blockaded “the entrance to the Port of Newcastle - the largest coal export port in the world -- and briefly interrupted ships heading to open waters....” (“South Pacific Climate Activists Blockade Australia Port,” 2014) “We are not drowning, we are fighting,” they proclaim.

A film, *Matagi Mālohi: Strong Winds*, tells the story of 350 Pacific’s journey to uplift their people and “shape a narrative that paints us not as victims of the climate crisis but as the leaders, the healers, the nurturers, the artists, the gardeners, the growers, the seafarers and the navigators” we are.

The film is based on *Matagi Mālohi*, the poem by the Fijian poet Fenton Lutunatabua with which we opened this report. In inviting young people to think of themselves as the “strong winds,” he unleashes and energizes their agency and invites them toward action. In challenging listeners and viewers to ‘unlearn’ assumptions and to cultivate tolerance for ambiguity, both the film and the poem invite,

evoke and unleash capacities that are hallmarks of effective action in contexts of complexity: deep listening, embrace of paradox, and cultivating and strengthening relationships of reciprocity, trust and trustworthiness.

Please take a moment to watch this [three-and-a-half minute film](#).



The Pacific Climate Warriors call forth **agency** through the use of traditionally-built handmade canoes as a blockade around the largest coal port in the world. They reclaim their own narratives, presenting themselves as active cultural knowledge bearers with a right to a say about their future. (Still from *Canoes vs. Coal*; <https://vimeo.com/109360466>, 2014)

A transnational arts and cultural work initiative, [Take Me To The River](#), has unleashed agency that supports transformative and restorative justice processes designed to address climate change.

*All over the world, cultural professionals, artists, architects and designers are grappling with the effects of climate change whilst actively involving their communities. Their work opens up creative spaces that raise awareness of changes in our environment and develop possible solutions to counter the climate crisis (El Khalil, n.d.).*

Through film, photography, VR video, audio-visual archives and community radio, *Take Me to the River* documents 35 artists and creative thinkers working in collaboration with their own communities from Brazil, Peru, Egypt, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico, Democratic Republic of Congo and other places. Their images, narratives and performances are woven into five sections (as described in the online exhibition):

*“Nature is repositioned as a Subject of Rights, presenting works that afford the non-human world renewed subjecthood and respect. Here, the platform emphasises innovations exemplified by recent landmark legal cases as well as critical cosmologies—indigenous belief systems that respect non-human nature as a living being.*

*Object of Abuse takes an unflinching look at the anguish of nature and the irreparable damage inflicted by exploitative practices.*

*Furthering the narrative of a legal gesture, Nature Prosecutes imagines vengeance. The precarious zones of natural disaster, dwindling resources and increasingly unpredictable circumstances are unmasked as direct results of human action.*

*The cruel and ambivalent effects of the climate emergency are charted in Humanity Sentenced. The online journey reveals rays of hope: The projects collected in Motion to Recover seeks new attitudes and empowered solutions to resolve these calamities” (El Khalil, n.d.).*

In *Take Me to the River*'s final 'Motion to Recover' section alone, initiatives from Ecuador, Peru, Mexico, Brazil, Morocco, and Congo are presented. For instance, in Peru, in 2012, the Indigenous Shipibo community of Nueva Betania successfully saved their territory from exploitation. They designed an intercommunal football tournament to create contexts for conversations where they could peacefully raise awareness of, and organize people to work against, the multinational petrochemical company threatening their resources. Through Shipibo: The Art of Peace, the Peruvian production company Minkaprod equipped the Shipibo community with the technical knowledge to write and create their own film recounting their story. The resulting film is a narrative of empowered resistance that strives to generate greater awareness of their battle and ultimately put an end to corporate and industrial incursions into Shipibo territory. A further aim of the project is to inspire other Indigenous communities who face similar threats.

From an Indigenous community in Brazil, we learn that “[j]ust as we have eyelashes to protect our eyes, the river has its plants. But without plants, the river will get sicker.” Brazil's Xingu River, used for both fishing and bathing by the Xingu people, had become murky and gravelly after its source rivers were polluted by chemicals used to support the soy monocultures that surrounded them. With the aim of making its rivers free of pesticides and other toxins, the Seeds Network and the Yarang Women's Movement in the Xingu Region of Brazil joined together to gather seeds and plant trees in order to reforest the land surrounding the springs. Over the course of ten years they gathered over a ton of seeds, planted more than one million trees and reforested 6,000 hectares. The Xingu region, supporting 16 ethnic groups speaking 16 different languages, is being revitalized.

*Take Me To The River* powerfully presents diverse examples of the agency of the chorus of voices against resource depletion, environmental abuse, the violation of the rights of Indigenous communities, and the damage to the natural world of which we are all a part, calling for justice for the natural world and the Indigenous peoples who are its protectors. Its 35 community engaged artists worked over several years with support from the Prince Claus Fund and the Goethe Institute, institutions that supported the development of the exhibition.

For a more complete and nuanced discussion of this topic, see [“Invoking and inviting agency” by Dr. Mary Ann Hunter.](#)

### *Arts and cultural processes UNLEASH creativity*

[This section draws heavily on [“Understanding, celebrating and expanding creativity: The contributions of participatory theatre addressing the complex challenges of peacebuilding in Kenya,”](#)

by Bonface Beti, a leader of applied theatre in Kenya and currently the senior program manager for the Green String Network]

How is it possible to create something new, to develop something that did not exist before?

The noted architect, educator and author Kyna Leski finds an answer in the metaphor of a storm. Both creativity and storms “begin from what appears to be nothing: this corresponds to moisture condensing and rising to form a storm cloud.....Storms arise out of a disturbance, and act to displace and destabilize. They gather energy and material. They gather force and direction. They propel and are propelled. They have consequences, from saturated ground to rainbows and all manner of other effects. And they have no discernible beginning or end. That is exactly what happens in the creative process” (Beti, 2021, p.2).

In the context of Kenya, a country reeling from the effects of colonial disruptions, one-party state dictatorships, inter-ethnic and gender-based violence, and related collective trauma, applied theatre is an embodiment of creativity. Practitioners in part base their work on the notion of the moral imagination, as articulated by John Paul Lederach: “the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist; it is the capacity to imagine and generate constructive responses and initiatives that while rooted in existing challenges of violence, transcend and ultimately break the grips of destructive patterns and cycles” (Lederach, 2005, p. 29).

In a context of various forms of political oppression, “citizens’ creativity becomes the first casualty, thereby causing a sensual numbing and erasure of peoples’ ability to openly ‘dialogue’ and use ‘critical thinking’ to engage with power structures to gain agency over their own lives” (Beti, 2021, p. 4). Social conflict in Kenya is a fitting example of a complex, “wicked problem” requiring a “multidisciplinary, holistic and a systems thinking approach”; creativity plays a central role in this approach to conflict transformation, catalyzing communal co-creation through interdisciplinary means, effectively bringing “what does not yet exist” into being (Beti, 2021, p. 2).

To address the numbing and lack of critical thinking, Amani People’s Theatre and the Green String network are engaging communities through theatre and other artforms to “consolidate grassroots imaginaries and everyday agencies across Kenya.” They work in relation to issues including election-related violence, trauma, land struggles, ethnic clashes, police brutality, gender-based violence and revenge. For instance, through their efforts, a “Peace Marshals” program was established as a community-based election violence prevention intervention before and during the new constitution referendum in 2008. On the spot, Forum Theatre<sup>9</sup> was applied as a spontaneous tool to defuse youth conflict tensions. Forum theatre has also been used by the Amani People’s Theatre in addressing the issues of Kikuyu landlords and Tenants in Kibera in 2014 to prevent potential violent outbreaks” (Beti, 2021, p. 6).

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<sup>9</sup> Created by Augusto Boal, [Forum Theatre](#) is a form of interactive theatre intended to transform lives as spectators become performers, acting out solutions to social problems.

“In Kenyan experience,” Bonface Beti writes, “creativity has been the act of turning new and imaginative ideas into reality.... the ability to perceive the world in new ways beyond conflict, to find hidden patterns, to make connections between seemingly unrelated phenomena and to generate creative solutions” (Beti, 2021, p .2).

For a more complete and nuanced discussion of unleashing creativity, see [“Understanding, celebrating and expanding creativity: the contributions of participatory theatre addressing the complex challenge of peacebuilding in Kenya”](#) by Bonface Beti.



In a context of various forms of political oppression in Kenya, citizens have experienced, according to Bonface Beti, a “sensational numbing and erasure of peoples’ ability to openly dialogue and use critical thinking to engage with power structures to gain agency over their own lives”. Here, Amani People’s Theatre “consolidates grassroots imaginaries and everyday agencies” as a way of unleashing **creativity** through which people are addressing issues of concern, including election-related violence, trauma, land struggles, ethnic clashes, police brutality, gender-based violence and revenge. (Amani People’s Theatre, 2020).

### *Weaving Multiple Arts Qualities in a Single Transformative Initiative*

[This section was written by Dr. Polly O Walker]

The preceding sections have been designed to emphasize a particularly salient arts quality present in each featured art and cultural initiative. However, most effective arts and cultural work processes and projects that we examined are characterized by the presence of multiple themes and qualities that address complex challenges. In exploring the following Indigenous arts-based initiative, Transformation, Action, Graffiti (#TAG), we illuminate multiple themes evidenced in their work that address the complex challenges of colonialism.

#TAG is an Indigenous led arts and culture based research project in which Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth participated in cultural healing and arts workshops to create community murals immersed in Haudenosaunee ways of knowing and being (Whitlow & Oliver, 2019). The project grew out

of a dream that was gifted to Haudenosaunee knowledge holder Kawennakon Bonnie Whitlow by Indigenous ancestors. #TAG was designed to “create a social environment that fostered an exchange of cultural traditions, created opportunities for internationalized decolonization, and fostered pride in Indigenous identities,” (Whitlow et al., 2019, p. 2), disrupting the suppression of Indigenous knowledge and denigration of Indigenous identity that are central processes of colonialism. Collaborating with Oliver, a Canadian settler scholar, Whitlow garnered grant support for engaging the Altapinta collective, a group of Mapuche and non-Mapuche artists from South America, to create murals in both Indigenous and settler communities. The project lasted for 6 weeks and included mentoring and teachings from Haudenosaunee elders and knowledge holders as well as a Mapuche elder. During these workshops, youth were encouraged to draw their reflections. The Altapinta Collective then integrated the youth’s artwork to create two sister murals, one in Six Nations and one in Brantford, emphasizing the interdependence of the peoples of both places. After facilitation of the workshops and creation of the murals, the research project documented the outcomes, and found that #TAG’s cultural and creative expressions promoted revitalization of Indigenous culture, promoted social healing, and disrupted colonialism.

In this project, we note that:

- **Through beauty**, the murals captured the attention of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, **inviting** them to consider both the rich legacy and ongoing strength of Indigenous communities, and reflecting on the ways in which colonialism continues to impact them.
- The project **invited multiple modes of sensemaking** through respectful engagement with Indigenist methodologies that integrate spirit, ancestors, dreams, prophecies, and traditional narratives in building peace. This epistemological pluralism itself is a form of redressing the violence of colonialism.
- The murals stressed the importance of Indigenous land and women, **affirming their dignity** in the face of ongoing disrespect and violence as evidenced in the high rates of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and the rape of the land through predatory mining and development.
- The project **affirmed interdependence** by reasserting human responsibilities in relation to the natural world, and by acknowledging the interdependence of the Haudenosaunee and Brantford communities..
- The processes and artwork **evoked paradoxical curiosity**, exploring how both Indigenous peoples and settlers have been wounded by colonization.
- The processes **unleashed the creativity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth** to create the images that formed the framework for public murals.
- **Agency was unleashed** through Indigenous led collaborations that disrupted colonialism through inviting, affirming, and evoking restorative justice and social healing.
- The project **evoked emotional complexity** through building on the central concepts of the Haudenosaunee Great Law of Peace in which “emotions are the basic pillars upholding the entire system....” (Whitlow et al., 2019, p. 6) and by inviting emotive responses from both Indigenous and settler peoples.

Please, see the murals and read a synopsis of the [#TAG project](#).

## **IV: Findings: Artfulness and the significance of aesthetic experience in fields beyond art and culture**

Given all the stories, examples and evidence noted above, it is no wonder that practitioners and leaders in many fields bring qualities of artistic and cultural engagement into their personal, social, cultural, political and professional lives.

In many cultures of the world, of course, aesthetic sensibilities are woven into the fabric of life, often as markers of respect, skill, and lives well lived (Avetisyan, 2021; Saito, 2021). In the world's current dominant cultures, however, the particular benefits of rational linear thinking -- efficiency, replicability, and profitability, for instance -- are prized; and purposive rationality (Bateson, 1972; Shaheed, 2021c) is cut off from insights, wisdom, intuition, and perspectives that arise from other modes of knowing. Purposive rationality, unaccompanied by insights from spiritual, emotional, and sensory domains and untempered by attunement to the natural world, appears to be resulting in patterns of production, consumption, development, and government and relationships that together comprise the 'culture of unsustainability', our greatest, overarching complex challenge.

In most standard Western aesthetic theories, ethical artistic and cultural processes and productions are understood to invite particular qualities of attention and unleash creativity and agency because they are marked off from the flow of everyday life. The frame focuses attention on the painting; the participatory theatre workshop has a beginning and an end; rituals construct liminal spaces that invite experimentation. But how about when we are swimming in the midst of the flow of everyday life? How can multiple modes of meaning-making and experiences of beauty be engaged to affirm dignity and raise awareness of interdependence -- in workplaces? How can processes be crafted that unleash creativity and agency -- in political strategy sessions and medical settings? How can citizens be supported to strengthen their capacities to embrace ambiguity and paradox in order to negotiate the complex challenges inherent in families, communities, and socio-political conditions?

In fact, "art and art-like ways of thinking and acting [are being deployed] in those areas of life which have not traditionally been associated with art or aesthetics: medicine, business, education, sport, and science, among others, as well as organizational life in general" (Saito, 2021). A recent trend in aesthetic theory focuses on 'every day aesthetics.' Writing in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the Japanese philosopher Yuriko Saito writes about the role of aesthetic experience in the cultivation of capacities:

*"Aesthetic experience...is expected to promote a dialogical process between the experiencing agent and the object, thereby widening and deepening one's sensuous, emotional, imaginative and intellectual capacity. Aesthetic dimension can play a surprising and often unrecognized role in determining the moral character of actions, persons and human interactions" (Saito, 2021).*

Social aesthetics, a particular inquiry within the larger field of everyday aesthetics, notice how "one's kindness, compassion, thoughtfulness and respect require appropriate expressions guided by aesthetic sensibility and skills....Harmonious and cooperative interaction with others also requires not only



appropriate cultural knowledge but also aesthetic sensibility to decipher groups dynamics and determine how best to help create a certain atmosphere” (Saito, 2021).

For instance, the fields of nursing and other medical professions are paying attention to the aesthetic dimensions of care and healing environments<sup>10</sup>. In his current work on aesthetics of care, James Thompson refers to “purposeful beauty.” In considering the aesthetics of care, he focuses first on dimensions of relationships between caregivers and the people they care for, noticing, for instance, the gentleness or firmness of touch, the tonalities of vocal expression, the pacing of activities, the focus of the gaze, the attunement to the vulnerabilities and preferences of the ones being cared for (whether or not these are expressed verbally).

*...[R]eciprocal acts of caring, whether formal, informal, interpersonal or collective, have a sensory, crafted quality that could be called an aesthetic. Caring, thus, I suggest, has an artistry and there are inspirational carers who exhibit a virtuosity in the way they care for and with others. As [the philosopher] Maurice Hamington argues, ‘this does not suggest that care givers are artists [...] but it does suggest that care givers are artists in terms of being aesthetically attuned to the bodies, actions, and relations of themselves to others’ I am locating the aesthetics here in the shape, style, action and interaction between two people, and I propose that in that focused attention between bodies we can recognise an artfulness that is too rarely acknowledged. (Thompson, 2020, p. 215).*

In their *Care Ethics and Poetry*, the philosopher Maurice Hamington and poet Ce Rosenow (2019) explore how engaging with poetry might help people develop habits of imagination that lead to more effective and responsive caring action, and “the improvisational skill of responding to needs in new and varied circumstances” (p 49). They consider how poetry enhances potential for individual growth, moral progress, and social justice (Hamington & Rosenow, 2019).

Another field that is focusing on the aesthetic dimensions of its theory and practice is conflict transformation<sup>11</sup>. In *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, John Paul Lederach (2005) writes that “the key to complexity is finding the elegant beauty of simplicity.” (p. 66) Taking inspiration from the art of the poetic form of the haiku -- which he practices daily -- he describes “Haiku moments,” when “[s]omething resonates deeply. It connects. What it connects is the eternity of truth with the immediacy of experience.....The core of the practice of haiku is to find your way to intuition unfettered by logic, explanation, or even emotion.”

*Knowing and understanding conflict does not take place exclusively, nor perhaps primarily, through processes of cognitive analysis, the breaking down of complexity into manageable pieces.*

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<sup>10</sup>Please see some other useful resources: Hanlon, P. (2012). [The future public health](#). McGraw Hill, Open Univ. Press and [Talking about Arts in Health: A white paper addressing the language used to describe the discipline from a higher education perspective](#) published by Center for Arts in Medicine of University of Florida/College of the Arts.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance *Dance, Human Rights, and Social Justice: Dignity in Motion*, Naomi Jackson and Toni Shapiro-Phim, eds., Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2008; *Changing Our Worlds: Art as Transformative Practice*, Michelle LeBaron and Janis Sarra, eds., Stellenbosch: African Sun Media, 2018; *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, Cynthia Cohen, guest ed., Volume 14, Issue 1, Special Issue: Creative Approaches to Transitional Justice: Contributions of Arts and Culture, March 2020.

*Knowledge and, perhaps more important, understanding and deep insight are achieved through aesthetics and ways of knowing that see the whole rather than the parts, a capacity and pathway that rely on intuition more than cognition (Lederach, 2005, p. 69).*

Lederach (2005) writes that the transformative moments of conflict are what we might call “the moments of the aesthetic imagination, a place where suddenly, out of complexity and historic difficulty, the clarity of great insight makes an unexpected appearance in the form of an image or a way of putting something that can only be described as artistic.” He suggests that conflict transformation practitioners think of themselves as artists,

*bringing to life and keeping alive something that has not existed. As artists, aesthetics requires certain disciplines from us. Be attentive to image. Listen for the core. Trust and follow intuition. Watch metaphor. Avoid clutter and busyness. See picture better. Find the elegant beauty where complexity meets simplicity. Imagine the canvas of social change. (p. 74)*

Some creative business leaders speak about artfulness in their practice in terms of mindfulness. When workers imagine themselves to be artists, suggests entrepreneur Ari Weinzweig, their work will be more creative, more inspiring and more effective. “Objects and places crafted with close attention to the environment and to details are likely to work better and be more sustainable,” he writes. Workers will be happier; workplaces will be more energizing; and experiences will be more energizing (Zingerman’s, 2018). Linking artfulness with complexity theory, Weinzweig writes, “Honoring the complexity of our lives, without creating unnecessary complications, is the charge for any of us who want to lead in ways that are in harmony with nature and that work well in the day-to-day doings of our organizations.” He makes the following recommendations to business leaders:

- Engage with the beauty and nuance of the natural world
- Design organizational processes that honor complexity
- Give people the freedom to make decisions
- Embrace diversity
- Steer clear of superficial simplicity
- Use the ecosystem approach
- Honor emotion, energy and intuition (Weinzweig, 2021)

Researchers of urban design are discovering that artful ways of conducting research on cities can lead to knowledge that is attuned to the complexities of local and political contexts that influence life in cities and cities’ livability. “Artful ways of unravelling the human, material and spatial entanglements typical in and of cities, allow us to reflect on ways in which this knowledge can be used in the service of more radical, decolonised and transformative pedagogical projects,” writes the South African artist and researcher, Rike Sitas. Attention to the cultural dimension of city life has allowed planners to consider the importance of fostering vibrant public spaces for civic life, assuming that a ‘good’ city not only meets the basic needs of people, but also creates the kinds of spaces where environmental and cultural life thrives: cities that are colorful, inspiring and alive as much as they are accessible, efficient and safe. Based at the [African Centre for Cities](#), Sitas frames her ‘artful research’ as a transformative project of:

*becoming otherwise: otherwise as change; otherwise as a processual becoming; otherwise as troubling; and other-wise as building wisdom about others and other ways of knowing.....*

*Urban politics tend to be seen to play out on formal political platforms, be it through public participatory processes (such as ward committees), community-based organisations or through social movements. Politicised art practice is useful as it provides a range of other kinds of political enrolment and demonstrates how sometimes the autonomy of artistic practice can provide an affective engagement with power that is able to move beyond the real and rational. Public-facing art projects can provide less threatening spaces for grappling with complex urban issues than formal social and political forums (Bishop, 2012; Bourriaud, 2002; Kester, 2004; Makhubu & Simbao, 2013; Sitas & Pieterse, 2013) (Bishop 2012; Kester 2004; Bourriaud 2002; Sitas and Pieterse 2013; Makhubu and Simbao 2013 in Sitas, 2020). The uncertainty, although daunting, is what allows new forms of knowledge to emerge (von Kotze and Wildemeersch 2014 in Sitas, 2020).*

Reflections on the aesthetic dimensions of caregiving, conflict transformation, and urban research suggest the myriad and diverse fields in which the contributions of artfulness -- those already realized, and those yet imagined -- are being recognized and sought. Educators, business people, therapists, development practitioners, clergy people, and more all practice in artful ways, and often document and reflect on the aesthetic dimensions of their practices as well.

One way to meet the challenges of the moment, and at the same time enhance the effectiveness of our practices and make life in communities and workplaces more vital and dynamic, is to focus on and strengthen the artfulness with which we live and work. In other words, many benefits will emerge when the aesthetic dimensions of our lives and our practices are noticed, celebrated and amplified.

Benefits of attending to the aesthetic dimension of everyday life include: facilitating creativity and imagination in educational and business ventures; providing humane and healing environments for vulnerable populations; and rendering scientific data easily graspable (Saito, 2021).

While more sensitive and effective caring practices are to be cherished, and more creative workplaces that recognize the uniqueness of each soul on the team will inevitably improve lives and in all likelihood enhance the quality of work, it is important to recognize that each of these sector-specific efforts can also support the transition from a culture of unsustainability to a culture of sustainability. While the efforts of artists and cultural workers will continue to be indispensable, they are not sufficient. A paradigm shift of this magnitude requires participation from every sector.

## **V. Recommendations**

This section was written by Emily Forsyth Queen.

*Find new ways to reframe complex challenges as interconnected and move toward a culture of sustainability*

No matter whether you are an artist or cultural worker, a funder or policymaker, the head of a cultural institution, a community leader, a researcher, a culture-bearer and/or an activist, youth or elder, we

can all begin by examining our own outlook on the particularly challenging times we face. While the emphasis on rational thinking and logical analysis can lead us to separately categorize these complex challenges, we see that they are often interconnected. Reframing contemporary challenges - including the climate crisis; legacies of violent conflict; inequality; authoritarianism and violent extremism; societal polarization; loss of languages and cultures; displacement and forced migration - as all being part of a culture of unsustainability can help us fully acknowledge the fragility of this moment and the importance of working holistically toward a culture of sustainability. This reframing can be seen in Mojave Nation poet Natalie Diaz's (2020) post-colonial love poems, described in Polly O. Walker's memo on Interdependence. Diaz's work weaves together challenges including the climate crisis, legacies of violence, and loss of cultures in phrases like "If I could convince you, would our brown bodies and our blue rivers be more loved and less ruined?" (p. 51).

Setting our sights and goals on crafting a culture of sustainability reminds us that our challenges are not abstract or separate from humanity; they are deeply connected to the way we have chosen and been made to move in the world. This also means that we have the potential to change this culture of unsustainability. The arts are ideally positioned to help make this pivot because they invite openness, affirm interdependence and dignity, evoke possibilities, and unleash human potential for creativity and agency. Practically, this means moving away from specialization, siloed ways of making sense of the world, and competitive approaches to problem-solving, and moving toward creativity, systems thinking, aesthetic engagement, transdisciplinary collaboration, and honoring multiple ways of knowing.

### *Invest more resources over longer time periods in the field of arts and culture*

Centering arts and culture means fully investing in their potential to nudge us toward the paradigm shifts we need. Currently, the arts are often seen as a "nice to have" way of working that can be added on, used as a tool, or live in the margins of systemic change. One example of the undervaluing of the arts can be seen in compensation for dance professors, which ranged from about one-third that of science professors (in South Africa) to about 55% in France. Dance professors' salaries in South Korea, the US, Chile and New Zealand are just under half of salaries of professors in the sciences (Sagan-Dworsky, 2021).

When funding for the arts is available, it is not uncommon for it to be distributed as 6 months or 1 year of funding for a particular project or piece of art, which diminishes its potential for deeper impact. Longer term initiatives allow artists and communities the time needed to build relationships of trust and integrity. The Amani People's Theatre, described in Bonface Beti's memo on Creativity, is an example of a grassroots institution that has built relationships and accumulated knowledge over decades. When election-related violence emerged, the group was well positioned to intervene with theatrical processes that facilitated necessary conversations. Preparing for and making paradigm shifts takes time, so investing over the long-term aligns with the important goal of pivoting to a culture of sustainability.

In most societies, especially those with significant wealth, public support for arts and culture generally supports mainstream institutions (national theaters, large museums, etc.). Increasingly, attention has turned to the equity of philanthropic practices and their support of expressive forms arising from

marginalized communities; art that engages people as art-makers rather than simply art-witnesses (Linares & Woolard, 2021). Attention to issues of equity in funding policies that challenge legacies of violence is an urgent part of moving toward a culture of sustainability.

Investments in networking, connection, and learning can help those involved in existing efforts meaningfully collaborate and learn from one another; models that both CAN and IMPACT are committed to and that we saw in *Take Me to the River*. To make a lasting difference and truly build the field of socially engaged arts and culture, greater investments must be made in its infrastructure, including processes and structures that support virtual and in-person knowledge exchange across regions, languages and generations; grappling with ethical dilemmas; and advocacy for the field as a whole.

### *Focus on ethical, anti-oppressive, aesthetic, and locally-rooted practices in artistic and cultural initiatives and beyond*

Moving with integrity is a key to making lasting cultural changes. Arts and cultural forms can be a key ingredient of such initiatives as they are well-placed to affirm, amplify and sometimes restore individual and collective dignity and agency. Turning to collaborations of integrity between, for example, Indigenous peoples and cosmologies and people from other cultures can help everybody embody the profound interdependence of the human and natural worlds. To minimize risks of harm in these collaborations, it is important to avoid reinforcing patterns of colonization, for instance by elevating art forms of colonial powers over local expressive forms. In an example at the Banco de la República in Colombia, described in Dr. Ángela Pérez Mejía's memo on Ambiguity, we see artforms and narratives of transgender women being honored - notably by a national bank within its art museum, two kinds of institutions where such women face marginalization. In contexts where ongoing oppressions and their legacies exist, using trauma-informed practices and emancipatory pedagogies throughout processes can help minimize risks of harm as well.

Investing resources with the aim of a global shift to a culture of sustainability does not necessarily mean supporting only large scale initiatives. Given the urgency and large scale of the interconnected challenges we face, there can be a tendency to look for a miraculous one-size-fits-all approach. However, the kinds of cultural shifts our planet needs often thrive more when happening in much more localized environments and on smaller scales, where quality, inclusivity, and ethics can be centered. These shifts can also happen by supporting practitioners and leaders in varied fields outside of arts and culture to bring qualities of artistic and cultural engagement into their personal, social, cultural, political and professional lives. People in any field can focus on the arts qualities that are already budding or blooming, and shift the aspects of practice and organizational culture that hinder their growth.

Additionally, investing more resources does not necessarily mean seeking out the newest most innovative arts and cultural initiatives. As examples in this report show, there are locally-valued, brilliant and impactful arts and cultural efforts already taking place all over the world that would benefit from being fully supported to allow their visions and dreams to unfold and emerge over time.

## *Align practices and processes with complexity*

The global COVID-19 pandemic illuminated how unpredictable and complex our world is and how we need to be able to work in systemic, adaptive ways. Meanwhile, it can still be difficult to internalize and practice needed changes that support working in alignment with complexity and adaptation. When faced with the enormity of the interlinked complex challenges arising from our culture of unsustainability, the response is too often to seek more control and grasp for ‘proven’ solutions, measurable outputs, impact assessments, and linear logic models, especially when making the case for investment of more resources over longer periods of time. While such responses can be helpful in some situations, they do not align with systemic, complex challenges.

What can feel harder to do, but is ultimately more effective when aligning with complexity, is to (as John Paul Lederach notes) begin processes of unfolding, unknowing, and untethering from past paradigms and lean into the freedom of knowing we can’t fully control anything (C. Cohen et al., personal communication, January 28, 2021). Artistic and cultural initiatives can engage multiple, diverse and even contradictory perspectives, worldviews and ways of knowing through practices that encourage untethering from past paradigms. They engender creativity, and embrace new insights that emerge through creative processes.

There are skills that can be helpful when doing this work to align with complexity, like having a strong grounding in ethics and values and building relationships effectively, even across differences, in order to avoid epistemic violence and other forms of injustice and oppression. This kind of work takes ongoing critical self-reflection and recognizing that we are each part of the systems we are trying to change; every move impacts both the system and oneself. As described in the ‘AFFIRM Interdependence’ section, Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic and staff from The British Museum built trusting relationships across differences as they worked together to prepare for and create the exhibition.

This alignment also involves consistently engaging with multiple perspectives while using systems-based approaches and looking for patterns that would be helpful to amplify, disrupt, or seed anew. Here, accountability is focused on looking for patterns that connect: being engaged with the context, relationship-oriented, and creative. It is about investing in sound artistic processes and practices more than particular outcomes.

It’s also important to cultivate, practice, and fund effective engagement (including through the arts) before, after, and outside of responding to or ‘solving’ particular problems. Creative and artistic processes have better chances of flourishing in relationship with complex challenges if they are cultivated and practiced continuously so they can seize emergent opportunities to creatively address complex challenges. Once an opportunity emerges, another key skill involves discerning when to invest more energy and resources in the process than the product and outcome. Solid, ethically-grounded processes may take more time as they make needed space for sensing what is happening along the way and then for reflecting, finding patterns, and adapting accordingly.

## *Meaningfully engage artists and cultural workers in decision-making spaces, especially where they have historically been excluded*

Wherever decisions are being made - about artistic programming, funding, policy, strategies for community collaboration, academic institutions, business settings, etc. - artists and cultural workers have important roles to play. Making space for artists in decision-making spaces can help everyone involved access the capacities needed to shift into new paradigms, inspire artful ways for everyone to move in their own role, and practice working in transdisciplinary ways. As we come to recognize that all humans alive today have experienced some degree of trauma, which can make trust, collaboration and creativity more challenging, we can also see the value that arts and cultural processes can bring to healing processes and capacities to hold ambiguity, interdependence, and unleash creativity.

Making meaningful spaces for artists involves facilitating relationships of trust, and being open to working with different processes without having predetermined outcomes in mind. Practicing being open to moments of emergence and to whatever unfolds from the creative process is, in itself, a helpful process that can support organizations as they learn how to move in more alignment with complexity. Artist in residence programs can be a helpful format for this as they often provide artists with a stable, supported platform from which they can explore the full range of their creativity and invite, evoke, affirm, and unleash with what emerges.

“Art At Work: Putting Creativity to Work”, an organization based in the small US city of Portland, Maine, did just this. Artist Marty Pottenger designed initiatives that directly engaged over 150 city employees and several thousand residents. From 2007 - 2015, this project “put creativity to work delivering measurable outcomes that improved police force morale, deepened cross-cultural understanding among Public Service workers and raised public awareness and appreciation for the role of government. City employees created hundreds of original artworks, performances, poetry readings and civic dialogues that engaged over 25,000 people in the region and reached over a million people through local and major media outlets. ..” (*Art At Work*, n.d.)

*Phka Sla Krom Angkar*, a moral and collective reparations project described in Dr. Toni Shapiro-Phim’s memo on Dignity, became an important element of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Cambodia. To honor survivors’ experiences, dancers listened to their testimony about forced marriage (i.e., institutionalized rape, which was classified as a crime against humanity during trials of Khmer Rouge senior leaders) and then performed their stories in the form of classical Cambodian dance and *pin peat* music. This project took justice outside of the halls of courtrooms and into spiritually and historically connected community spaces, inviting belonging and a rejection of labels of shame among survivors (Shapiro-Phim, 2021).

Having such experiences with artists and cultural workers in unexpected arenas may be the best way to understand - in ways that tap into our many ways of knowing: cognitive, sensory, embodied, emotional and often spiritual - that artistic and cultural practices are not peripheral but central to addressing complex challenges and reshaping our paradigms. The arts and cultural practices also bring powerful aesthetic approaches that invite various disciplines to come together across differences with more openness and in ways that unleash creativity.

In environments that are not yet ready to commit the necessary resources to invite artists and cultural workers into or to deepen their roles in decision-making spaces, we hope the language and examples in this report can help institutions bridge into such opportunities. Finally, everyone has a role to play in documenting and sharing what worked and what didn't in their particular organization or community when making the case for inviting artists and cultural workers into decision-making spaces, as - for example - Jan Cohen-Cruz (2015) did in *Remapping Performance: Common Ground, Uncommon Partners*.

### *Protect freedom of expression and artists' human rights*

The crucial role of artists and cultural workers necessitates urgent attention toward protecting them from attacks, imprisonment, exile, and other efforts to silence their expressions. Freedom of expression is a guaranteed human right, with limits only on war propaganda and expression that incites discrimination, hostility, or violence (Bennoune, 2018). Upholding the right to artistic and cultural expression and the accessibility of these expressions by people of all backgrounds is a responsibility of all institutions. The Report of the OHCHR Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights adds that "National, subnational and municipal governments should...offer asylum to those whose artistic or cultural work, including that which is socially engaged, has led to their persecution, and facilitate the continuation of their work in exile" (Bennoune, 2018).

Especially when they are challenging the culture of unsustainability and dominant powers, "...artists, cultural workers and all participants in their actions face risks of harm because of their visibility and the attention that arts and cultural projects invite" (Bennoune, 2018). This harm can come from governments - in the name of laws against terrorism, defamation, cyberattacks, or anti-state activities - or from others such as extremist groups and corporations (Fine & Trébault, 2021). Artists at Risk Connection has created a safety guide with steps that artists and cultural workers can take to help protect themselves: preparing with risk assessments, strengthening cybersecurity, network-building, and emergency planning; documenting threats and harassment; and seeking help quickly from the many organizations around the world devoted to protecting artists (Fine & Trébault, 2021). The group that created the art *Teeter-Totter*, as described in Polly O. Walker's memo on *Interdependence*, set up its bright pink seesaw on a section of the border wall that bisects Ciudad Juarez, Mexico and El Paso, Texas at night because the US Border Patrol refused permission for its installation. This award-winning installation kept risks in mind while committing to freedom of expression and protest (Walker, 2021).

Keeping in mind that cultural expression is a human right, it can also be helpful to reframe artists and cultural workers as human rights defenders, which can open up more doors for both funding and protection from the robust human rights field (Fine & Trébault, 2021).

### *Further document the power of arts and culture, gather collective insights, and build on this report*

Gathering documentation allows practitioners, artists, policy-makers and funders to learn from the strengths and limitations of existing and past practices. It is also a way to call attention to the diverse ways that artistic and cultural initiatives and artfulness in other sectors can powerfully contribute to a culture of sustainability. To align with both complexity and the full transformative power of arts and



cultural forms, this documentation - and the funding devoted to it - should focus as much or more on the process and relationships between all stakeholders as on the final product. In the section above on evoking emotional complexity and honesty, we see such documentation from Carole Kane as she describes her role as the facilitating artist during a public consultation for a memorial to be placed at an unmarked baby plot at Belfast City Cemetery:

*An important part of this process involved making pieces of hand-made paper. The “awakening” or sharpening of the senses, stirred an internal resonance, and reconnected people with a sense of experience that had laid dormant for some time... Anticipating an element of awakening or connection to take place, it was also my aesthetic responsibility to welcome or point it out when it happened – the invitation to empathy and honesty. This enlivened the artist/practitioners. They re-connected with self and each other (Kane & Ibrahimovic, 2021, p. 5).*

When making sense of these experiences, gatherings among and across stakeholder groups will even further enrich what we can learn and how we turn that learning into action. These kinds of gatherings can be facilitated by groups focused on strengthening infrastructure of this field through artful networking, connecting, and learning opportunities.<sup>12</sup>

Likewise, this report and its recommendations will only blossom into action through further conversations, iterations, and creative demonstrations of the transformative power of arts and cultural processes. Ultimately, this report and its recommendations are humbly offered as a jumping off point for anyone engaging with arts and cultural processes in order to directly or indirectly address complex challenges. Onward, together!

## **VI. Closing Words**

Let’s issue an invitation to ourselves, to each other, to our colleagues, and our communities, to bring all of our ways of making sense of the world – our senses, our cognition, our emotions, our intuitions, our conversations, the wisdom of our traditions – to bear on the extraordinary challenges and opportunities of this moment. We can enliven, soften, strengthen and embolden ourselves by seeking and creating beauty.

Let’s affirm the dignity inherent in each person and in each community, embodying this quality in our actions and relationships with each other, even in the face of conflicts. Let’s act in accordance with the interdependence that inscribes our relationships with each other and with the natural world, realizing the transformative power of stories that are co-created by apparent adversaries and the healing that can accompany ceremonies and ethical art-making practices in all media.

Let’s reclaim the fullness of our feelings, and invite others into spaces that evoke honest exploration where laughter and tears often meet. Paths toward a shared, less violent, more sustainable future can

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<sup>12</sup> For information about such opportunities, please visit websites, for instance, of [IMPACT](#); the [Community Arts Network](#); [UNESCO Art Lab for Human Rights and Dialogue](#); [Agenda 21: Sustainable Development Goals Knowledge Platform](#). Also consider signing up for [Peacebuilding and the Arts Now](#), a quarterly publication of the Brandeis Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts.

be found in acknowledging the ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings that surround us. We can cultivate curiosity about the paradoxical nature of things that initially seem to contradict each other. Let's engage in and support the artistic and cultural processes that evoke our capacity to navigate the ambiguities and paradoxes that inevitably accompany complexity.

Let's unleash our own and each other's individual and collective creativity and agency, to engage constructively with intertwined complex challenges and to cultivate a culture of sustainability in all the ways -- both large and small -- we can imagine.

### *Author's Biography*<sup>13</sup>

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## **VII. Appendices**

In order of appearance in this report.

[Key features of contemporary global challenges by Ameer Shaheed](#)

[Aligning practice with complexity by Emily Forsyth Queen \(she/her/hers\)](#)

[Engaging with beauty by Armine Avetisyan](#)

[The mind on art: cognitive functions and states associated with aesthetic engagement by Ameer Shaheed](#)

[Initial thoughts about the relationship between the arts and the affirmation of human dignity by Toni Shapiro-Phim](#)

[Interdependence by Polly O. Walker, PhD \(she/her/hers\)](#)

[Fostering honesty, exploration and disruption: starting points by Jasmina Ibrahimovic and Carole Kane](#)

[Negotiating ambiguity, nuance, and uncertainty: a view from Colombia by Ángela Pérez Mejía, PhD](#)

[Embracing paradox and contradiction by Ameer Shaheed, informed by a chart made by Dagmar Reichert](#)

[Invoking and inviting agency by Mary Ann Hunter](#)

[Understanding, celebrating and expanding creativity: the contributions of participatory theatre to addressing the complex challenge of peacebuilding in Kenya by Bonface Beti](#)