

Invite | Affirm | Evoke | Unleash

How artistic and cultural processes transform complex challenges

Cynthia Cohen and the IMPACT initiative

August, 2021



IMPACT: Imagining Together Platform
for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation

Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, Brandeis University

Community Arts Network, Porticus Foundation

ReCAST, Inc.

Thank you for this opportunity to share emerging thinking about the Creative Community in relation to the mission of the UN. It is an honor to be here with you and with my co-panelists. Secretary General, at the recent General Assembly meeting, you argued for coalitions of solidarity to address the inequities that are carving “Grand Canyons” of divisions and inequities that need to be bridged. I am pleased to report that you and members of the SMG can count on a diverse legion of creative and courageous fellow travelers who dwell in creative communities throughout the world, already harnessing the power of creativity to bridge these divides. We endorse your vision of the transformations required to save humanity and the planet.

A recent global research initiative explored both theory and practice to understand how arts and cultural approaches contribute to the transformation of complex challenges. We studied examples that illustrate particular “arts qualities”. As you will see, these examples are rooted in communities across the globe, and highlight different modes of expression.

**inviting through
beauty**



The Chilean literary collective Casa Grande rains down poems over cities, like Guernica, that have suffered aerial bombardment. Survivors juxtapose their traumatic memories with new memories of looking up to the night sky and seeing **beauty**.



affirming dignity

Dancers interpret the testimony of survivors of forced marriage, imposed by the Khmer Rouge. By contributing input as the performance piece was being developed, survivors report reclaiming and affirming their **dignity**.



**affirming
interdependence**

Arctic peoples' experiences of the climate crisis are compellingly rendered in Arctic Culture and Climate, a collaboration between the British Museum and indigenous communities. The exhibit celebrates the resilience of Arctic peoples and affirms the **interdependence** of humankind and the natural world.



evoking honesty

Hand-crafted paper produced as part of Petals of Hope evoked expressions that had been rendered silent by trauma, transforming into art flower petals placed on memorials after a bombing in Northern Ireland. These works were presented to victims' families.

evoking paradoxical
curiosity and tolerance
for ambiguity



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 “extra-ordinary” women – nuns venerated in spectacular portraits on the walls of the Museums of the Banco de la República.



unleashing agency

The Pacific Climate Warriors unleash **agency** through the use of traditionally-built canoes to blockade the largest coal port in the world. They reclaim their own narratives as active knowledge bearers with a say about their future.

**unleashing
creativity**



In Kenya, Amani People's Theatre “consolidates grassroots imaginaries and everyday agencies” to unleash **creative actions** addressing election-related violence, trauma, land struggles, police brutality, and gender-based violence.

We found that ethical arts and cultural processes like these can be crafted to navigate ambiguity and paradox, key capacities required to interact effectively with complex systems. Arts and cultural practices can unleash creativity and agency – capacities urgently needed for innovation. Ethical arts and cultural practices affirm human dignity, as well as our interdependence with one another and with the natural world. And arts and cultural processes can be crafted to do all this not by coercion or trickery, but by issuing invitations to viewers and listeners to co-construct meaning. Through their beauty, arts and cultural initiatives invite transformation while respecting the integrity of all. Authoritarians thrive on single dogmatic narratives. But the just and inclusive world we want for our children requires embracing multiple narratives simultaneously. Current patterns that dominate our political, economic and social lives comprise a culture of unsustainability. The consciousness and actions that support this destructive system cannot be changed through rational logic alone. Because ethical artistic and cultural initiatives honor sensory, embodied and non-linear modes of knowing, they are well-suited to contribute, in gentle and powerful ways, to transformations that are already underway, the creation of a new paradigm, a culture of sustainability

Recommendations

1. Reframe complex challenges as interconnected
2. Invest more resources over longer time periods in the field of arts and culture
3. Focus on ethical, anti-oppressive, aesthetic, locally-rooted, and trauma-informed practices
4. Align planning, funding, monitoring and evaluation processes with complexity and systems theory
5. Meaningfully engage artists and cultural workers in decision-making spaces, especially where they historically have been excluded
6. Protect freedom of expression and artists' human rights

Resources

IMPACT – The Imagining Together Platform for Arts, Culture and Conflict Transformation, Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, Brandeis University

<https://www.brandeis.edu/ethics/peacebuildingarts/impact/index.html>

Community Arts Network

<https://www.community-arts.net>

UNESCO Art Lab For Human Rights And Dialogue

<https://en.unesco.org/news/art-lab-human-rights-and-dialogue>

Report of the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights

<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/HRC/37/55>

Increasingly, creative communities are strengthening our effectiveness by connecting with each other and recognizing ourselves as part of a field embedded in multiple ecosystems. We are creating an infrastructure with spaces to share insights, articulate ethical principles and explore dilemmas.



Cynthia Cohen, Ph.D.
cecohen@brandeis.edu

THANK YOU!

*“Humanity dignifies, restores and reimagines itself
through creating, performing, preserving and revising its cultural and artistic life.”*

-- Karima Bennoune, Special Rapporteur for Cultural Rights, Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights