

## Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts

By **Arlene Goldbard**

(This story appeared in High Performance #64, Winter 1993.)

In this country, community arts seem to exist in a perpetual present, seen by almost everyone except its hard-core practitioners as new and consequently in need of definition, explanation, and most of all, legitimation. So claiming that community arts do indeed have a knowable past is not an innocuous exercise in history-writing. It is part of a campaign for legitimacy, a way of saying that the phenomenon has roots, substance, integrity, and staying power. For those who believe in the value and validity of community arts, articulating their history becomes an imperative.

Imperative or not, it is not an easy thing to do—not as compared with describing the history of, say, Salem, Massachusetts, the internal combustion engine, or the Republican Party. There are no constitutions, membership cards, blueprints, prototypes, geographic boundaries or halls of records to mark off what is legitimately a part of community arts' history and what is not. As far as I know, no one has built the definitive community arts archive, no one has been offering courses in community arts history to broaden the university arts curriculum, and indeed, few in the United States have even argued very strongly for establishing community arts funding programs with philosophies, standards and aims distinct from those applied to more conventional arts approaches. What we have here is the history of an idea and how people have acted on it. And the fact that community arts have been insurgent ideas—as much rebellions against establishment arts practice as visions of another way for artists to work—doesn't make the task any simpler.

So what I want to suggest is more along the lines of a meander than a map. I see the community arts idea as a creek, winding its way through the plains and valleys of culture, here rushing over rocks and there reduced to a trickle, picking up momentum from an encounter with a tributary, losing it at the next turn.

### Starting Point for a Meander

Our starting point has to be that old bogey, definition—essential (in the form of self-definition) to any movement, but dangerous in the hands of the wrong people, namely those who wish to use it as a yardstick to enforce classification and reject what doesn't measure up. So this definition is not the sort you can wrap grant guidelines around, but one that might guide the student of history tracing the path of our creek.

A great deal can be said about community arts, since they encompass a huge diversity of medium, method, and subject. But for our purposes, two things suffice.

The first essential point of definition is that community arts practice is based on the belief that cultural meaning, expression and creativity reside within a community, that the community artist's task is to assist people in freeing their imaginations and giving form to their creativity. This is in contrast to the establishment arts idea that only a lucky few—trained,

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professional artists—embody such abilities. It is also in contrast to the old-Left idea of proper cultural policy, a sort of "trickle-down" theory in which chamber musicians would play for factory workers who would thereby be inspired to take up violins and form their own symphony orchestras: high culture for the masses.

The second essential point of definition is that collaboration between artists and others is central and necessary to the practice of community arts. This is in contrast to the establishment arts idea that nonartists' role is simply to form the audience for the work of professional artists; and also in contrast to the old-Left idea that socially conscious artists "speak for" the people who are incapable of speaking for themselves, channelling working peoples' rage and hope into proper artistic form.

As every reader of this essay surely knows, a great deal of interesting and important arts work doesn't fit even this rudimentary definition of community arts. Nothing in this essay should be taken to imply that community arts offer the only legitimate way to work with art and social concerns, or even the best way. I hope readers join me in willingness to let the whole garden bloom—a hundred flowers, a thousand, any way imagination can take root. But these are the boundaries of the community arts creek, and thus the guideposts for our meander.

### **Up the Creek**

The present run of community arts activity in this country began in the '60s and flows right through to the present. Community arts were part of the phenomena that came to light as the dulling fog of the '50s began to lift, and like a great deal else that characterizes the '60s, their origins were spontaneous and idiosyncratic.

Take the San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Program, generally regarded as a founder and exemplar of community-based arts work. NAP was created in 1967 by an adventurous professor at San Francisco State College and some of his students, although it quickly spun off from any connection with the university and, before long, acquired an affiliation with the city's Arts Commission. During its heyday in the late '60s and '70s, NAP was fueled by infusions of federal money—funds for summer youth jobs, the kind of quick-and-easy grants a panicked Washington, DC, made available in the years following urban uprisings in Watts, Detroit, Newark and other ghettos. Enterprising young artists put together programs that satisfied the feds' wish to occupy young people in constructive pursuits, creating murals, learning and performing music, putting on street festivals and so on.

As time passed, NAP became a well used source of support for cultural development in San Francisco communities untouched by other public arts projects, people whose only contact with the shiny new marble performing arts palace the city was building came through the eviction notices they received when their houses were knocked down to make room for it. City money was added to federal funds to build NAP's budget. Neighborhood organizers were employed, talented and ambitious people who knew their own communities and served within them as a source of inspiration and help. A community design service turned out flyers and posters for cultural events; a staff member helped people write grant proposals and obtain publicity; light and sound equipment was loaned out for community events; small project grants provided money to buy paint for a mural or rent a hall for a performance.

NAP's high-water mark came in the late '70s, at the apex of CETA funding—public service employment made possible through the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, designed to relieve long-term unemployment. San Francisco was a pioneer in using CETA to aid

cultural development. When the first 75 CETA arts jobs were created in 1973 (the brainstorm of an inventive NAP staffer who happened to have interned in Washington), 3,000 unemployed artists showed up to apply for the them. After that, the phenomenon of CETA arts spread across the country like wildfire. Department of Labor officials estimated that over \$200 million had been allocated to the arts through CETA in fiscal year 1979 alone.

By the late '70s, community arts groups across the country were using CETA money and just about every other form of federal funding to finance an array of programs that put people to work in community cultural development. To illustrate, in mid-1980, just before Ronald Reagan's election as president, Baltimore's Theatre Project not only maintained its core program presenting innovative touring performances; it was also one of the leading community arts institutions in the country: CETA support as well as some Community Development Block Grant money underwrote its neighborhood circus; city Department of Housing and Community Development money financed a performance piece involving kids in the campaign to eradicate rats; and National Endowment for the Humanities grants enabled a production based on the reminiscences of Baltimore's old-time neighborhood residents, compiled through a massive oral history project. The Theatre Project was especially successful at "working the agencies" to secure this kind of funding, but was by no means the only group doing so. The moment was opportune: public agencies having nothing formal to do with the arts were seeing community arts as valid tools for engaging communities in self-education and self-activation. It's not that the federal government was especially more enlightened and far-sighted then than now; but money was available and community arts projects offered highly visible, often effective and always colorful ways to spend it.

By the time Reagan had been in office for a year, all this had changed. Here's what Don Adams and I wrote about the Theatre Project in the March 1982 issue of *Cultural Democracy*: "Deep staff reductions at the Theatre Project have virtually eliminated the Baltimore group's community service programs: The Rat Squad...was ended in mid-March...because of Community Development Block Grant reductions; all but two members of the Baltimore Voices oral history company have been laid off and in August the project's NEH funding expires....[T]he community program...is largely gone."

### **Money Changes Everything**

At this point you may be wondering, why so much to say about funding? Is the history of funding the same as the history of the movement?

If we're talking about the last 25 years, I'm afraid so. All over the country, the story was the same. Energetic, idealistic, socially conscious artists were driven by the forces that propelled "The '60s" into being: rebellion against socially enforced conformity, recognition of pressing social problems that had been obscured by the quietism of the Red Scare and its aftermath, and the flowering of cultural identity in racial, ethnic and sexual liberation movements. The energy to develop a community arts practice unquestionably came from those artists; the seeds that sprouted in community arts activity came from their own communities. But what nourished those seeds was public money—after all, what else was there? Most of the neighborhoods housing community arts programs were poor; except for a few communities, there was almost no private philanthropy active in the field; and people's ability to work for nothing and with nothing was understandably limited. Most of the time, funding resulted from a convergence of interests: the government wanted to keep kids busy during the summer, offer jobs to the hard-core unemployed, or encourage

community life in depressed neighborhoods, and community artists saw ways to make good use of the money set aside for these purposes in the service of their culturally democratic aims. This was not arts funding per se, but it supported arts work. The tide of public money that flowed down the community arts creek beginning in the late '60s was used almost exclusively to finance jobs in a labor-intensive field that was well supplied with eager and able workers. When the money was cut off, the stream slowed to a trickle: people lost their jobs, whole organizations folded or were forced to cut back to a point just this side of disappearance.

Which brings us to the last ten years. Without public service employment programs, with no funding programs dedicated to community arts support, development in the field has been slow. Some of those who lost their jobs or organizations in the early '80s tried to adopt the rhetoric of the "Reagan revolution," refocusing their work toward the market economy. Some managed to make a living this way, but what they were doing could hardly be called community arts. Others made the best of less-than-ideal situations: for instance, most state arts agencies continued operating artists' residency programs. These were usually oriented toward the conventional residency model, a short-term project in which students or senior citizens or other groups of people are thought to derive benefit simply from proximity to an artist—from attending informal performances, for instance. But clever community artists have managed to do a great deal with residency programs despite their limitations, using them to create opportunities for cultural development and community collaboration. The groups with the most tenacity and shrewdest fundraising have carried on by adjusting their language to the times without surrendering the core values of their practice. But it would be unreasonable to expect a great leap in community arts' development in such an inhospitable period as the Reagan-Bush era.

Recently, there have been signs of hope. People in the field are again talking about it, as this issue of High Performance demonstrates. A few major foundations have hinted at new interest in community arts work. With a new administration in Washington and a post-Cold War zeitgeist, there may again be some small openings that community artists can exploit. If this happens—if people start identifying themselves as community artists again, if they articulate their own working principles and assert their own values and methods, if they demand funding programs tailored to their practice rather than vice versa, if new opportunities arise to meet together and discuss the nature of the work, to train younger people in it and thus express some hope for a future—if these things happen, then it will be very handy to know something about the history that led to this moment, if for no other reason than to avoid repeating its mistakes.

### **Sources and Tributaries**

Where can we look for community arts' antecedents? I want to suggest a number of traceable influences, at the same time warning that this is by no means a definitive list.

Community arts are rooted in anti-Romantic thinking about the arts: against the notion of the artist as working for the approval and reward of a disembodied marketplace of the elite; and in favor of the idea of the artist as an integral part of community life, working with and for ordinary people and rewarded, as other workers hope to be, with a decent living and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. A certain nostalgia for tribal and pre-Industrial Revolution agrarian societies pervades the movement; for William Morris' call for artisanship; for the sort of artist-as-worker stance adopted by the activist artists' groups of the '30s and most fully expressed in the proceedings of the first American Artists Congress of 1936. Where nostalgia is present, of course, even among anti-Romantics there is danger

of romanticization.

The period between the two world wars was a tremendously fruitful one for socially conscious artists, both in terms of thinking and of practice. The community muralists of the '60s and '70s were strongly inspired by their forebears, the Mexican muralists of the '20s and beyond, who also inspired George Biddle to return to the States and suggest to FDR in 1933 that he and a team of muralists should embellish the new Justice Department building in Washington. FDR already knew a little bit about public arts programs: when he was governor of New York, the state relief director had allocated funds to the College Art Association to employ 100 artists in settlement houses. Biddle's suggestion started a chain of events that created the New Deal cultural programs of the Roosevelt administration, including the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project and other programs which, at their peak in 1936, employed 40,000 artists. Every community artist I have met becomes misty-eyed at the mention of the Works Progress Administration (WPA). It's not that all 40,000 were employed as community artists (though some were, for instance working in new black theaters, foreign-language theaters and rural programs set up to provide assistance for amateur theater) that brings a tear to the eye, it's that a positive social role for artists was conceived and supported by the public sector. As Federal Art Project director Holger Cahill put it, "It has brought the artist closer to the interests of a public which needs him. And it has made the artist more responsive to the inspiration of the country, and through this the artist is bringing every aspect of American life into the currency of art." The WPA was ended by a presidential proclamation in 1942, the victim of censorship, the Red Scare and war preparations, and that's part of the community arts legacy too.

Some hardy remnants of prewar cultural activism survived into the postwar period, notably in rural areas—the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, for instance, and some arts extension agencies established before the Depression. For example, Wisconsin's arts extension, under the leadership of Bob Gard, invited people to send in their poems and stories so they could engage in critical correspondence with professional writers; in 1958 they began to publish the journal *Arts in Society*, which took up many of the issues community artists face today.

But the strongest boost to community arts came from the newly-enlivened activism of the '60s, which brought together constituencies hungry for meaning and action. As John O'Neal put it at a meeting of the Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee in 1982, "Our overall objective in the Free Southern Theatre was to support and reinforce the aims and purposes of the black liberation struggle....So the most valid times...were when we were part of a broad social movement, the broad movement that in fact created us and made it possible for us to exist. And I would even go so far as to say it made it possible for what is generally called 'alternative arts' to exist."

Community artists are not usually jet-setters, but much has been accomplished by a few people who've been able to travel. During the '70s, for instance, quite a few British community artists visited the U.S., bringing news of their own practice, which was well developed and relatively well supported by public funding. Some people were inspired by the "town artist" model pioneered by Scots artist David Harding, in which a community more or less adopted an artist who lived there for an extended period, often years, working collaboratively with community members on projects which serve their needs, from a pageant or history play to architectural embellishments and playground sculptures. Others were impressed with the open-ended nature of British community arts practice: because community arts groups were able to obtain general operating

support, they could enter into free-form collaborations with communities without pressure to come up with finished products on deadline.

From Europe came the notion of the animateur, the artist-organizer whose aim it is to vitalize community cultural life and assist people in becoming active cultural creators. From Africa, Asia and Latin America came news of artists working in cultural development in post-colonial situations. In 1980, for example, when Marty Ardren helped bring Jacob Sou of the Regional Cultural Action Center to the U.S. from his base in Togo, community artists in this country saw the parallels to their own circumstances. As Jacob described his aims: "I didn't study African history in school. I studied French history, and because it wasn't my country, I couldn't keep it....I don't know that much about African history—I have to learn it, after school. So we try to teach people 'what is Africa?' 'What are African customs?' And generally, they are learning it for the first time." In describing the basis of his training program, Jacob explained to trainees: "you won't be just an artist any more. You are, but now you have to work for the whole community....You shouldn't go there and try to do what you would like to do, but help the community do what they want to do."

During the '70s and '80s, liberating education and liberation theology were strong influences, sometimes in art-shaped packages (in theater, the work of Augustin Boal and Alan Bolt, for example, who visited this country and made contact with a great many people involved in community performance), but often as general philosophical principles extrapolated to arts work. When Paulo Freire described the act of self-liberation as learning to speak with one's own voice and say one's own words, community artists around the country heard his words as validation of their own practice, and many of them explored further what he had to say. Ross Kidd emerged on the North American scene in 1982 as a veteran of popular theater experiments in Botswana and a founder of the Third World Popular Theatre Network, which defined popular theatre as "'committed' theatre, a theatre of oppressed groups and classes which works in support of the interests and struggles of those groups and classes...it is part of a conscious process of social transformation....It is a means of deepening critical consciousness, provoking discussion of issues, examining alternative courses of action, and mobilizing people for struggle. At best it is more than theatre for the people; it is theatre by the people enabling them, through the process of making theatre, to express their concerns, define their situation, and strategize for action."

By the mid-'80s, it was possible to see a tributary flowing the other way, from the heart of community arts work into other areas of the arts. A great deal of installation and performance art since then appears to be influenced by community arts, relying as it does on the active participation of nonartists and focusing as it does on provocation, poking at social sore points. I suppose High Performance, as the site of a convergence between these two tendencies, is the fitting host for any dialog that does take place between them, which brings us back to the present. As for the history of the '90s, it's yet to be made.

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"Postscript to the Past: Notes Toward a History of Community Arts" originally appeared in *High Performance* #64, Winter 1993.

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Original CAN/API publication: December 1999

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