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Community art as medicinal practice

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I am what's known as a visual artist. At least that's the story that's told about me. I tell a different story about myself. In it I am a healer. What appear to be posters and images are actually nutrients that I release into communities to boost their collective and individual immune systems. My hope is to identify and help counter the internalized toxic messages that prevent a person or group of people from knowing and acting on their power. I'm not referring to the outside sources of oppression that impact communities but the messages through which those external insults become internalized. My expertise-- such as it is-- is in reading the ways different communities experience trauma and finding the stories that can counter its effects.

Even as we tell stories we do it from inside of a story that we tell ourselves about how and why we tell stories.

The program says that I'm here to provide a "framework for action." That's partially true. In the sense that a framework for action always starts with knowing who you are and where you are and in the large scheme of things the first step is always the most important.

I am here this morning to do for you what you do for others in your communities and touring routes: to hold up a mirror that will reflect back to you a picture of yourself and your surroundings; a picture that hopefully will help you see something that you may not have noticed before... or may have forgotten. I don't know exactly what will catch your attention, so I have to include a mix of things in the reflection in the hopes that some of it will prove useful.

The stories we reflect back in our artistic mirror are deliberately selective. We strip away what we consider to be distracting and reflect back something we think is essential or useful or challenging. I may hold a mirror before you that reflects that you are beautiful even if you don't feel it. Having that reflected back through me validates that part of you that already knows it's true and wants to believe it; you are then more likely to act as if you believe it and that makes it more likely that you'll have other interactions that confirm it. Art is something out there that changes something in here that, in turn, changes something out there.

Starting in the 1930s there were series of children's books such as the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew that featured adventurous young people. They were popular in the US and England and a few other countries. Nancy Drew, the teenage sleuth, was a smart, capable teenager who solved mysteries. I read a news story once, many years ago, about girl who was kidnapped and abused, tied up and left in the trunk of a car abandoned along a country road. She freed her hands, figured out how to release the latch from the inside and found her way to a farmhouse. When she was later asked how she had maintained such presence of mind under trying circumstances she replied, "I asked myself what Nancy Drew would do." This is the power of stories.

A more historically rooted example of the same principle comes from the Seminole resistance in what is now the Southeastern United States. The Seminole were comprised of Native people from a number of tribes and African captives who had escaped or been freed from the plantation system. They were organized into separate Indian and Black fighting units and were very effective fighters. Newspapers were prohibited from reporting the victories of African units over the army in order to suppress the knowledge that Blacks were capable of defeating Whites. History is full of cases in which the story that gets told is itself an essential element of the conflict. Stories open and close the doors of possibility.

I think of the tools that we use as cultural actors as a bag of medicinal herbs. We can use them--in the proper doses and combinations-- to raise a fever or lower one; to awaken memory or reframe it; or to stimulate anger or lust or tenderness or fear, often guiding an audience from one of these states to another.

My body of artwork includes pieces that fit in different ways into the stories of individuals, communities and movements. In one case three hundred postal workers showed up at work in a bulk mail center wearing red

T-shirts featuring a row of bunnies with their paws linked over the slogan “Bosses Beware: when we’re screwed we multiply.” Management had recently broken a contract commitment to find jobs for the workers within a certain radius if they were to close the center. The bunny shirts so upset management that the postmaster declared them a violation of the Postal Service’s “zero tolerance for violence” policy. The workers then had us print three hundred more shirts with just bunnies and no words, three hundred bunny buttons and so forth. In the end management backed down on the shirts and also found the jobs.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is a story sent in by a machine operator who was in the first wave of women in the building trades. She faced a hostile environment at the work site from her male co-workers and got no relief from either the owners or the union leadership. She said that when she felt overwhelmed she’d go into the shed and stand in front of my “ABCs of Organizing” poster and it would remind her why she was doing this.

Falling somewhere between these two are the posters that I made in collaboration with my sister for the people in the mountain barrio we come from in Puerto Rico. I created posters based on Aurora’s oral history interviews and we made them available in the neighborhood. This is an area which loses young people to the cities in part due to the volatility of the coffee economy. Our assessment was that, although there are a variety of alternative crops and development schemes that hold promise, the first step was to reawaken community memory. The youth didn’t know that that flat area by the road had been the location of Don Paco’s store which included his bread ovens and housed two of the rooms where their parents had gone to school. Each poster ignited animated discussions about the old days and arguments about who the people in the photos were and how things were in the past. The children and grandchildren of the elders were often hearing these stories for the first time. In order to re-vitalize a community’s economy there needs to be a shared awareness of its value. Of the stories embedded in the soil.

Like herbs in the body, each of the above examples was medicinal in its specific setting. A nutrient in one context can be a toxin in another. Consider the following statement: “we are really all the same as human beings.” In one setting this can be a healthy reminder of our common humanity. In another it can be an effort to avoid confronting racism. Context also determines whether your work will bring people or a community closer to a tipping point. Tipping points are being reached all around us continually. Leaves drop from trees, a cat leaps after a rabbit, the atmospheric temperature drops a degree and rain starts to fall. We experience this on many levels. Think about that when you’re in your cozy bed tomorrow morning and you really have to pee. You don’t want to get up yet the balance of comfort is shifting and soon it will tip, inducing you to push the covers aside and get out of bed. Whether a particular work brings someone in your audience to a tipping point or even stimulates a change in the accepted community discourse will depend on factors you can’t see or measure. In some instances you will have a pretty clear idea of what’s in the balance and other cases will present surprises. It may be that there will be no immediate effect but you are helping create conditions that someplace downstream will be part of a shift. A single straw doesn’t really break a camel’s back. Six hundred pounds of other straws need to be in place first for that final one to push the camel’s load-carrying capacity past its tipping point. Each straw is as much part of the process as the last one.

Picasso is quoted as calling art “the lie that tells the truth.” Lying, it turns out, is one of the most effective tools for telling deeper truths. Because they are deeper truths, it turns out that people already know them-- usually at a deep level and often subconsciously. Most of what we think of as teaching is really validation. People know a tremendous amount but don’t have the confidence to embrace it, remember it or trust it until it is reflected back from the mirrors of their social environment. What excites people when they leave your show is not usually the thrill of revelation; it’s the shock of recognition.

This applies equally to healing. Medicinal herbs give the body a boost and remind its component systems of what they are capable of. The body must then heal itself.

Water from the well

Commercial culture addresses the same hungers as art but for an extraneous purpose: to sell commodities. It works by isolating and extracting from each area of organic human experience its most concentrated and

addictive extract. The need for food channeled into cravings for sugar, salt and fat without the nutritious vitamins, fiber and carbohydrate complexes in which they are embedded in nature. Sexuality is re-packaged as body parts and orgasms devoid of the messiness of personality or the complexity of connection. The hunger for personal agency is transformed into narratives of concentrated violence, providing a vicarious experience of power. Self doubt is amplified and then addressed with relentless exhortations to purchase inputs--from hair conditioner to methamphetamine-- that will make the bad feelings go away. The deployment of truths to tell a lie.

We carry out our work within a cultural ecosystem that also hosts the cultural toxins just mentioned. The observations, insights and challenges embedded in our performances may complement or conflict with these other messages but they always exist in relation to them. Our art is designed to communicate with people steeped in these influences.

What ends up in the performance space is the result of a series of decisions about what to reflect in our magic mirror.

Unlike an actual mirror, we can shape the reflection with our art in order to bring attention to particular realities or raise specific questions. We do this by combining two powerful tools: dreaming and analyzing. Dreams are wells that tap into the deep aquifers of our being. We receive information about the world unfiltered and uncensored. If there's something you want to avoid thinking about or feeling or dealing with in life it will be waiting for you when you close your eyes at night. The arts are the collective dream-life of a people. In dreams and art there are no natural constraints so they inevitably raise uncomfortable topics. That's why dictatorships always want to control or suppress the arts. It's as close as they can get to controlling dreams.

What comes up from the dreamworld must then be subjected to analysis because the cultural toxins in the soil seep into the groundwater and filter up into our consciousness. When the community mural movement revived in the 1970s in the US the artists had the notion that they would be mere conduits for community self-expression. They thought they'd call community meetings and just channel what the people wanted onto the walls. What they found was that the ideas that arose spontaneously from the community were laden with clichéd images from advertising and Hollywood. It caused them to rethink their responsibility and forced them to acknowledge that they had a particular expertise to bring to the process. The body can heal itself but the healer brings knowledge to help it to break addictions and re-vitalize its inherent power.

Scent trails and borders

Art, like leadership, is all about context. What is a pretty design in one setting can be a political provocation in another. I've come to believe that there's not really such a thing as "political art," just art in a political context. Art, which does not naturally recognize boundaries, runs up against the boundaries imposed by political and social interests. Politics are about imposing or negotiating boundaries. The censorship board in apartheid South Africa blocked importation of the children's book "Black Beauty," a story about a horse. They determined that the words "black" and "beauty", linked so closely in the title, might encourage destabilizing ideas. Art was just being art; it was the social landscape of apartheid that created politics around it.

Context is always changing. In the current political moment the subversive, destabilizing aspects of art are increasing because the barbed wire fences of today's politics are being continually moved, constricting the public cultural space ever more. Art must either shrink to fit the space remaining or it will, by its nature, come into conflict with the interests that seek to contain it. The issue is that art is fundamentally about curiosity at a time when curiosity itself is under attack. Let's think about this...

Curiosity is the default setting for babies. They are quite focused on discovering the world. Have you ever watched babies explore each other? It is curiosity that leads me to discover that you are at the center of your world just like I am at the center of mine. That's the basis for empathy, for love and, ultimately, for solidarity.

For a small elite to exploit the labor and resources of populations, it must be able to make people think of themselves as a fragmented collection of separate, conflicting interests. They must be kept from noticing how

much they have in common and thereby from acting on their commonalities. The apartheid regime established a system of education under which instruction for each tribal group would take place in its own language. To us that would seem progressive, right? Here we fight to have our cultural identities recognized. But in the Apartheid context it was meant to keep English from becoming a common language which Zulus, Xhosa and Ndebele could utilize to converge into a united force. The white population was a unified minority which would rule over a nation of divided minorities.

In the US, scape-goating and hate mongering are used to maintain divisions. Its goal is to convince you that things you know about yourself--that you are a complex being just struggling to meet your legitimate needs and aspirations--is not true of selected "others." This is a general operating principle but is specifically designed to consolidate a white, conservative political block. If you listen critically to right wing commentators--Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Glen Beck and the like--you'll notice that they function primarily as solidarity blockers; as curiosity preventers.

They devote much of their time to convincing their own base that dark people, Islamic believers, LGBT folk and foreigners are "bad guys"-- a category of beings that does not leave room for curiosity. Such (sub) people are dedicated to confiscating all you have worked for and to enslave your children in their service. It would dangerously weaken your resolve to wonder what they dream of for their children or imagine how they might relax with friends after a long week. They are the soulless "enemy" from the computer game made manifest. That's the message. In the aftermath of the 9/11 2001 attacks, government officials even warned the public that to try to understand the motivation of the attackers would be to assist the enemy. Authority loveth not curiosity.

Art is inherently curious. That's its beating heart. It's about following a scent trail to see where it leads and being surprised at what we discover. It is common in artistic work to take an unsympathetic character and then unpack a back-story that awakens audience compassion for them. That transformation of perspective--so essential to art-- challenges the narrative that people are fundamentally either good or evil.

So the story which we ourselves are living and within which we create our art, whether we admit it or not, is played out on a cultural battlefield. In this strangely asymmetrical struggle each pole has a unique advantage. Fear is a highly effective short term instrument. It's easy to frighten a kitten under a sofa. In the long term, however, curiosity is irresistible. If nothing else scary happens for awhile, kitty will come pad-pad-padding out again and will even sniff at the thing that had scared it. Fear naturally dissipates and must be regularly re-introduced whereas curiosity is an underlying condition.

It turns out that all people are present or former babies. This is an advantage for those who want people to connect with each other. We all are structured to be frightened for brief moments and to revert to being curious when the danger passes. The fight or flight reflex is only good for crisis management, not normal life.

Stories within stories

We can hope that exploring a question with an audience will expand the functional range for curiosity within a community. There are stories all around that can only be unlocked by questions and only when questioning itself is freed from the shackles of habit and denial. Not far from here, along the Mississippi River, are the structures of old flour mills. Many are now office buildings, museums and condos. They are the reason the Twin Cities are today a global center for the medical instruments industry. In the early twentieth century the high rate of serious injury in the mills sparked the manufacture of prosthetic limbs. That was how it started. Notice that the balance of power in the community limited what questions could be asked and what solutions could be offered. Instead of asking how working conditions might be improved to protect worker's bodies-- a question that would confront the interests of the powerful mill owners--the solution was to create a market opportunity. Where curiosity can be kept within bounds so can the threat of change.

Stories vary a great deal in form, message and impact. What they offer in common is the reminder that the world may be--and probably is--different from what we think. Just the fact of a story is an invitation to experience the world through somebody else's filters. This is an evolutionary advantage: we get to form our

picture of the world from multiple vantage points. When we face a new situation, we can call up other people's memories as well as our own to help us respond. What would Nancy Drew do? That capacity is continually reinforced by art, humor, music and dreams

Not everyone is pleased by that gift. The Pinochet dictatorship in Chile prohibited teaching evolution, a framework that tells us that each organism experiences the world in accordance with its own needs and that change is constant. Dictatorships prefer to instill acceptance of the present as inevitable and society as having only one set of interests.

What stories are worth telling has to do with context. It will be different in Haiphong, Selma or Port-au-Prince. The same show will play differently in each place. Any story we tell is a piece broken off a larger story which is part of a larger one yet. Ultimately all stories are small details of a single one that encompasses the universe. No matter how small our focus we should remember that it's part of something bigger. The American Indian Movement was founded not far from here, on Franklin Ave. One of their most famous actions was the occupation of the village of Wounded Knee. They were staging a protest against tribal government corruption and violations of sovereignty and they were taken aback at the disproportionate, heavily militarized response from the federal government. Only later was it learned that the US had designated the Black Hills a "National Sacrifice Area." All impediments to massive coal and uranium extraction were to be removed in the name of national security. The appearance of an organized movement committed to grassroots power and environmental integrity was a direct threat to those plans. The larger story is always present on the stage--in fact it is the stage--for our chosen stories. Understanding, in fact, is about grasping the relationship between the detail and the pattern.

The story I tell myself about myself--that I'm a healer-- opens up pathways for action and possibilities for relationship that are organic to that narrative. We are creators, actors and audience for our most important story: the one about who we are. It's the story that guides us as we navigate the complex currents of our communities and it evolves as we come to embody it.

The herbs of a healer speak the language of the body. They stimulate its organs, cells and component systems to communicate with each other in ways that alter chemical balances, circadian rhythms and metabolic processes. This parallels the role of the artist in community: we administer doses of metaphor, memory and imagination capable of triggering senses and emotions and thoughts; fashioning stories that validate or challenge deeply held-- sometimes unexamined--understandings. This is our super-power. We locate our practice within a complex web of interlinked communities on a continent in flux in a world in motion. Our ability to understand what we're doing is always outdistanced by the complexity of the social systems and histories we are meddling in. Like farmers-- always in improvisational interplay with the land--we apply our craft as best we can but can never fully predict the outcome.

Cultural practice is a form of leadership, unelected and (unless we arrange otherwise) not formally accountable. What accountability we do have is that of an organism to its habitat; we have to fit in well enough to survive. Effectiveness depends on a peculiar balance of arrogance and humility. Humility to listen deeply, arrogance to go beyond what we hear. It isn't obvious how to do that and that is why we need each other. A network such as yours, and a gathering such as this one, frames a story within which to share stories about the stories that enable us to tell stories. It's a wonderful thing.