

IN DEPTH

Arts and Building Peace: the Basics and Envisioning the Future

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Throughout human history, and in every culture, communities have improved their lives through engagement with creative and expressive forms. Cultural heritage and the arts are resources for marshalling attention to urgent concerns, addressing conflicts, reconciling former enemies, resisting authoritarian regimes, memorializing the past, and imagining and giving substance to a better future. Communities express their deepest values and ethical commitments through aesthetic forms and processes. Humanity dignifies, restores and reimagines itself through creating, performing, interpreting, preserving and revising its cultural and artistic heritage.

Recognition of the contributions of arts and culture to peace is real and growing. It is fueled not only by artist-peacebuilders and cultural facilitators, who are strengthening their practice through documenting, assessing, and critically reflecting upon their work. Interest also is increasing from practitioners of more conventional peacebuilding approaches, such as mediation, facilitation, negotiation, transitional justice, human rights advocacy, and development, who are acknowledging that rational modes of engagement alone are insufficient to engender the kinds of transformation necessary for interrupting the dynamics of violent conflict.

Whether a work, artist, or institution contributes to more just and less violent communities depends upon the creators' skill and the aesthetic and ethical intentions of the artists and producers; the aesthetic and ethical sensibilities embodied in the work and ancillary activities; the resources – sometimes from non-arts groups such as mayor's offices¹, truth commissions² or human rights organizations³ – devoted to

extending the reach of an initiative; and, of course, the responses of those who witness and interpret the work.

When the arts function as art, they evoke distinctive qualities of attention and response that can best be understood within the framework of “aesthetic experience.”⁴ Aesthetic experiences, in general, are intensely felt human apprehensions of the world, engendered by engagement with nature and with certain human-made forms and processes. They arise from the reciprocity between the forms being perceived and the perceptual capacities and sensibilities of the perceiver(s). Aesthetic apprehension of a work results from the interplay between the formal qualities of the work (rhythm, texture, form, density, pacing, etc.) and the perceivers, who open their senses and their minds, allowing themselves to receive the work and notice its resonances within them.

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Aesthetic experiences engage the senses as well as the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual faculties to invite special qualities of embodied attention and response, such as disinterestedness, passionate commitment, receptivity, alertness, serenity, playfulness, and metacognitive awareness. These qualities of presence afford unique opportunities for individual and collective learning, empathy, imagination, and innovation, all of which are central to peacebuilding efforts. For instance, even when an artwork’s content is upsetting, painful, or jarring, its formal qualities can enliven and energize its perceivers to face and act on conditions that otherwise might be too unbearable to confront.

Also, for both artists and witnesses, engaging with the arts can restore and nourish capacities most needed for the creative transformation of conflict, including communicative abilities that often are diminished by violence.

In peacebuilding initiatives, the arts and cultural practices aim to embody a kind of power that rests not on injury or domination, but rather on reciprocity, connectivity, and generativity. The arts can be crafted to engage people compellingly, but non-coercively, in the issues that confront their communities. Evidence of this power can be felt in the transformation of energy in a theater or in changes in relationships evoked by a poetry workshop; it can also be assumed based on the record of illegitimate regimes that repress, imprison, exile, and even assassinate artists.

Of course not all artistic works or expressive cultural practices build peace. In fact, there are many instances of art's power marshaled in service of militaristic regimes and used to exploit vulnerable constituencies in the quest for profit. For instance, colonial administrators built grand theaters for showcasing the hegemonic culture of the empire, diminishing by comparison local and indigenous performative practices and cultural forms⁵. Infamously, music has been appropriated into regimes of torture⁶, and aesthetically-refined films were used as Nazi propaganda⁷.

In conflict regions around the world, artists and cultural workers undertake projects that address important peacebuilding challenges. By way of illustration, but by no means an exhaustive accounting, arts- and culture-based initiatives can be crafted to:

- Strengthen campaigns of nonviolent resistance
- Create opportunities for members of adversarial communities to meet in positive, creative contexts
- Support communities to engage in the difficult work of reconciliation⁸
- Draw global attention to abuses of human rights and reinstate a sense of agency among victims
- Restore identity, meaning, and hope in the face of alienation, dislocation, and disruption

As the field of peacebuilding and the arts gains legitimacy, artist-practitioners are grappling with several interrelated challenges. Among them are acknowledging and minimizing risks of doing harm. For instance, artist-peacebuilders can minimize the risk of:

- Engaging in “epistemic violence” (injury to local ways of knowing, cultural practices, and forms of expression)
- Worsening divisions between conflicting groups
- Re-traumatizing communities and individuals that have suffered from violence
- Undermining artistic integrity by involving artists in crafting requests for proposals and calls for productions
- Creating or perpetuating injurious power dynamics
- Subjecting artists and project participants to physical harm or incarceration, particularly in societies with limited freedom of expression or autocratic governance⁹

While artist-peacebuilders want their approaches to be embraced by and be of use to the related fields of development, public health, education, human rights, transitional justice, etc., they would like their partners to understand that the transformative power of the arts relies on artistic integrity.

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The absence of a shared vocabulary can create an obstacle for artists and non-artists who seek to collaborate. The *Acting Together on the World Stage* project proposes a framework that is designed to facilitate communication and respectful exchanges between artists and other peacebuilders. This ‘permeable membrane’ framework focuses attention on both the transformations achieved within the bounded spaces of artistic workshops, rehearsals, and productions and the impact when such changes are “cast back” into communities¹⁰.

In the coming half century, the world will be grappling with violent conflicts related to extremism, climate change, migration, growing inequality, and unaddressed grievances, as well as the apparent breakdown of the governmental, financial, and

educational systems that have been relied upon to address such problems. Solutions to these overwhelming challenges require creative approaches, global in scale, but finely tuned to meet the challenges of local contexts.

Arts-informed initiatives can support communities to identify sources of resilience and craft imaginative solutions to seemingly insurmountable threats. To make its most effective contributions, however, the peacebuilding and the arts field would benefit from a much more robust infrastructure¹¹: institutional spaces for documentation, dissemination, and research; e-journals that invite multi-modal presentations that reflect both artistic excellence and intellectual rigor; local, regional, and global networks of effective action that link practitioners across generations and regions.

1. Doris Sommer, "From the Top: Government-Sponsored Creativity," in *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
2. Salomón Lerner Frebres, "Memory of Violence and Drama in Peru: The Experience of the Truth Commission and Grupo Cultural Yuyachkani," 2011.
3. Aida Nasrallah and Lee Perlman, "Weaving Dialogues and Confronting Harsh Realities: Engendering Social Change in Israel through Performance," in *Acting Together, Vol. I*. New Village Press: 2011
4. Cynthia Cohen, "A Poetics of Reconciliation: The Aesthetic Mediation of Conflict" (dissertation, UNH, 1997), 247–51,
5. Charles Mulekwa, "Theatre, War, and Peace in Uganda," in *Acting Together, Vol. I*. New Village Press, 2011.
6. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, 2014,
7. "Leni Riefenstahl," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.
8. Cynthia Cohen, "Creative Approaches to Reconciliation," in *The Psychology of Resolving Global Conflicts: From War to Peace, Volume 3*, ed. Mari Fitzduff and Christopher Stout (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2005).

9. For ways of minimizing risks of these potential harms, see Cynthia Cohen and Polly Walker, “Minimizing Risk of Harm,” in *Acting Together*, 2011.

10. Cynthia Cohen, “The Permeable Membrane and the Moral Imagination: A Framework for Conceptualizing Peacebuilding Performance” in *Acting Together, Volume II: Building Just and Inclusive Communities* (Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2011).

11. Jonathan White and Cynthia Cohen, “Strengthening Work at the Nexus of Arts, Culture and Peacebuilding” A Working Session Convened by Search for Common Ground and the Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts at Brandeis University, 2012.

Note from the author: This essay is adapted and abbreviated from an article by the same name that appeared in *Insights*, an e-newsletter published by the United States of Peace. Please turn to the [original version](#) for important details that were cut due to space constraints.

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