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## **The Art of Social Imagination**

### **A Discussion of New Creative Community**

*with Nick Rabkin, Jennifer Williams, Jamie Haft, and Arlene Goldbard;  
facilitated and edited by Dudley Cocke*

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## The Art of Social Imagination

### A Discussion of New Creative Community

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*New Year's Day, 1980, found Arlene Goldbard living in Washington, D.C. monitoring and reporting on our nation's de facto cultural policy. The fact that Arlene was doing this says a lot about the leadership role that many of us were counting on the federal government to play in leveling the field so that our many U.S. cultures would have an equal chance to express themselves, to develop, and, inevitably, to cross-pollinate. It was a substantial and beautiful vision then, and remains so today.*

*Why, then, has an ideal seemingly so simple, sensible, and democratic remained so elusive? As the U.S. began its hard turn to the right with the election of Ronald Reagan in November 1980, folks like Arlene and I began experiencing a kind of whiplash reminiscent of the carnival ride, *The Whip*. Strapped into the saucer, one's ideas and values were spun out from the center to the margins with cranium-jangling centrifugal force.*

**Nick Rabkin**

One of Arlene's most insistent points is that community cultural development places a higher value on "process" than on conventional artistic practice, which seems to be all about the final product. "Cultural expression is a means of emancipation, not the primary end in itself; the process is as important as the product." (p.43) The process she refers to, of course, is the production and creation of art work. It is important because, "direct, hands-on participation moves people more than anything else, enlarging their vision of possibility much more immediately than might be achieved through mere observation." (p. 54) Sometimes, she acknowledges, there is a tension between process and product, and that tension is generally framed as "community versus quality." (p. 54)

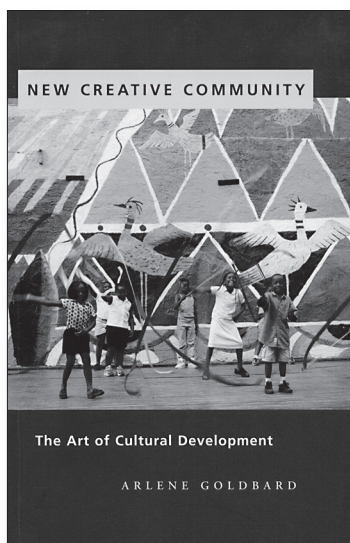
From the perspective of arts funders, this can be a serious problem. I have never seen funder guidelines that

*For those relatively few who decided to hold on in the ensuing decades, the trick became to maintain an honest line of inquiry – one that was not reactionary, that resisted responding in-kind with a countervailing, single-minded ideological agenda, rigid like that of the right-wing political operators of the ride.*

*In New Creative Community, Arlene offers 260 pages of new hope and possibility about how communities do and can express and develop themselves through the arts, insights gained from just such an honest holding on to democratic cultural principles. For us, as grantmakers immersed in the nitty-gritty of evaluating proposals and grants, New Creative Community provides an historical, theoretical, and practical context from which to view, measure, and feel good about our efforts.*

*Read now as two long-engaged culture activists, Chicago's Nick Rabkin and London's Jennifer Williams, discuss the book's importance to their work and for arts funders. Sidebars provide an undergraduate art student's – Jamie Haft's – response to the book and the author's responses to questions posed by the other participants.*

Dudley Cocke  
Trustee, the Bush Foundation



New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development. Arlene Goldbard, 2006. New Village Press

support "emancipation through cultural expression." Most express interest in supporting artistic "vibrance," "excellence," "innovation," "creativity," or some close relative. Some add that they support broadening audience access to that excellent and vibrant work. But the bottom line is that funders, with few exceptions, tilt toward product, not process. The product of community process rarely have the polish of work produced by professional artists alone, and that leaves community cultural development on the margins of arts funding, often far from the work and the institutions that draw the lion's share of support.

**Jennifer Williams**

We have just completed a study of funders in London who are not traditional arts funders, but for whom the arts have played an incidental or accidental role in their work on societal problems. For funders who do not have the arts as their traditional focus, it can be difficult to know what will deliver the results they want. One interviewee said that no matter what new social problem they set out to tackle, he could be sure that by 8 o'clock the next morning there would be a mountain of proposals from arts organizations saying in a most articulate way, "We do that." One corporate foundation officer was very clear about arts applications: If a company comes to us and says, "We'd really like to work on young offenders to break the cycle of re-offending," we say, "Fantastic, we do that. How are you going to do it?" If they say, "Well it's an arts project," we'll be fine with that. If on the other hand, they come to us saying, "We want to do an arts in prisons project," then we will struggle a bit asking, "Why would we fund that?"

## Are You an Artist?

**Prospective Arts Student:** *Are you an artist?*

**Person 1:** *No, I use the arts in the classroom and in after-school workshops teaching kids how to express themselves and helping them understand the material from their other subjects in new ways. No, I'm not an artist.*

**Prospective Arts Student:** *Are you an artist?*

**Person 2:** *No, I use the meaning and the beauty of art to facilitate community dialogues, with the goal of encouraging civic participation and changing local policy. No, I'm not an artist.*

**Prospective Arts Student:** *Are you an artist?*

**Person 3:** *No, I use the arts to help people with spinal chord injuries find the will to go on. No, I'm not an artist.*

**Prospective Arts Student:** *Are you an artist?*

**Person 4:** *Yes, I am! I have a BFA, and now I'm temping by day and bartending at night – waiting for my big break on Broadway or the Silver Screen!! Yes, I am an artist!*

Students spontaneously created this spoof last semester in Professor Jan Cohen-Cruz's "Community-Based Performance" class at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. One of the best things about Arlene Goldbard's *New Creative Community* is its insistence that there is a worthwhile alternative to waiting tables after receiving a \$200,000 dollar degree. Imagine earnestly taking courses like "Audition Techniques," which teaches the actor how to pick and deliver monologues, or "Preparing for the Profession," which offers tips for taking good headshots – all to prepare for the moment a stranger offers you your first big break!

At our nation's professional arts schools, where are the courses about the history of U.S. cultural policy, about the politics of arts funding, about the ethical responsibilities of the not-for-profit social sectors? Instead, we only glaze the surface of these alternative universes when, for example in a class about keeping up with the latest funder buzz, we hear: "art for art's sake" is presently out, but "cutting-edge" is still in.

Experiencing first-hand how young artists are being trained, I'm worried about the future of the nonprofit arts sector. As Arlene points out, my generation hasn't known a time when there was generous national support and federal leadership for the not-for-profit arts. Born during the Reagan administration, all we've been told is that big government is bad and big business is good. The effect of this message has been to blur the line between the commercial and nonprofit arts sectors and to prompt us to confuse private gain with the public good.

So thank you, Arlene, for a lifesaver – for your comprehensive mapping of the principles, theory, best practices, and fascinating history of an alternative to the commercial and the nonprofit commercial sectors. I'll be taking *New Creative Community* with me when I graduate in May and I'll also be leaving a copy behind for other students searching for a new way to pursue their dreams of becoming an artist.

Jamie Haft

A number of the non-arts funders emphasized the importance of the rigor needed by arts organizations entering this type of work. One funder reported having had eighty-five proposals from arts groups for a new social program, but finding that the quality of the social part of the work was so low that only two or three were short-listed and only one chosen.

Many funders felt that collaborators from different disciplines in social-change-and-arts projects simply lacked training to work well together. This points to a need to consider where the responsibility for paying for the development of cross-sector practice lies. Should non-arts funders also contribute to the professional development of artists so that they can become full collaborative partners? My suspicion is, that if this is mainly taken on by arts funders, the result will lack the impact or credibility it needs. Collaboration with other funding fields is a stronger choice. Arlene's book provides vital language that can be helpful in thinking about this work.

The job of developing what is essentially cross-sector work will continue to fall between the stools of most funders' current, often departmentalized, aims and objectives. Cross-sector funding is a risk that funders must take if, as most futurists contend, innovative solutions to social and economic problems exist between "stools." There is a large need to define and observe the nature of blended outcomes from cross pollinating ideas and best practices.

*Nick Rabkin*

In a sense, the difficulty that Jennifer's research exposed is the utterly natural human tendency to create fixed categories for comprehending the world and insisting that everything in it must fit into one or another of them. Funders construct their worlds by first naming their programs categorically. This has two benefits. It helps funders stay focused so their money can be most effective. And it enables potential grantees to decide whether a funder is a good prospect, so they don't waste their time with the wrong ones. (In another sense, program categories are moats that limit the number of proposals funders must review thoroughly.)

As Jennifer says, the problem is that program categories, by design, are not well suited to recognize innovation and creativity. This is a fundamental concern for the arts in spheres orbiting around poverty and inequality. The spheres encompassed by these categories are typically understood by philanthropy in economic terms, so it should come as no surprise that funders find it difficult to grasp the role of the arts in them. Arts advocates may have actually added to the muddle by accepting the economic definition of the problem and arguing that the arts are a powerful economic strategy. (I've often wondered why there are so many poor artists if the arts are so powerful economically.) We'd do better to argue for a different

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understanding of the problem of poverty, one that is as informed by culture as it is by economics

The arts confront a similar definitional challenge in the realm of education. The arts' place in schools has been in question since the dawn of public education, and advocates have crafted a succession of tactical arguments designed to appeal to conventional notions of what schooling is for: that is, its principal job is to prepare young people to enter the world of work. The earliest justification for a visual arts curriculum was based largely on the growing need for draftsmen and clerks with legible handwriting to serve burgeoning industry in the nineteenth century. With respect to funding, arts educators, like community cultural development workers, find themselves falling into the gap between arts programs designed primarily to sustain nonprofit arts institutions and education programs to improve the academic performance (read: not the arts achievement) of students, particularly low-income and minority students.

Indeed, the parallels between the best community cultural development and the best school-based arts education are quite profound. At the root of both is a deep commitment to the principle of "active participation in culture," in Arlene's words. This is the difference between community cultural development and ordinary public art. Likewise the best arts education engages students in making art, not just in its appreciation. And the art that such students make is grounded in their own lived experiences and perspectives, just as the art of community cultural development is. I find myself thinking that the two practices are fundamentally the same thing in different venues, and that "teaching artists" and "community artists" are, for most intents and purposes, interchangeable terms.

#### *Jennifer Williams*

Picking up on Nick's point, the Centre for Creative Communities is working with Urban Learning Space, an organization based in Scotland, on "New Designs for Learning." The project's target group comprised people who were judged to be lacking in skills and by definition "unemployable." On page 24 of *New Creative Community*, Arlene states, "The advent of new media has softened the distinction between consumption and participation." Urban Learning Space is combining new technology and creative practice to attract learners missed by the system for whatever reason. It does not use teachers. Musicians, filmmakers, and photographers are among those who serve as mentors to create an aura of respect and belief in the learner's self-identified talent. Along the way, the students gain skills in computer use, interaction with others, and the confidence of knowing how a world, like the music world, works. The projects have been highly successful with high attendance and many participants gaining jobs. Although the projects could show in quantitative terms

## **Arlene Goldbard: Q & A**

### *Nick Rabkin*

What do you think about the relationship between teaching artists and community artists, the relationship between the practice of community cultural development and the practice of artists working to transform the experience of schools for students?

### *Arlene Goldbard*

The formulation "teaching artist" is relatively new to me. I've just made the acquaintance of Eric Booth, a leader in that field, and subscribed to *Teaching Artists' Journal*, so I hope to learn more. From what I've seen, the relationship can be as deep as teaching artists want it to be. In other words, art can be taught as technique, separate from questions of value and meaning; if a teaching artist were to parachute into a school with this approach, his or her work wouldn't have much in common with community cultural development. But teaching artists who are interested in creativity as social (as well as personal) imagination, who want to teach meaning as much as method, and who want to understand their work in a much larger context will find a great deal of value in learning more about community cultural development history, theory, and practice. My experience has been that the larger the framework of meaning an artist brings to such work, the more powerful and exciting the work will be. So I have high hopes for more dialogue between artists who place themselves in each of these allied categories, "community artist" and "teaching artist," and I think we'll discover many useful commonalities.

### *Jennifer Williams*

What can you tell us about funders whose main interest is in health, education, community, and other social concerns and who have recognized the role the arts can play in helping them achieve their desired outcomes?

### *Arlene Goldbard*

My response is based primarily on my experience in the U.S., as I think you know more than I about public funding in the European community and elsewhere internationally. Over here, I think there are two main issues.

First, there can be a funny double standard. Funders sometimes feel comfortable with applicants who know the jargon of a particular social service field, for instance, and can couch their claims in a language of accomplishment that resonates because it is familiar. "Everybody" knows a particular approach is solid because...well, because they just know it. From what I have seen, funders who enter that comfort zone can sometimes be lulled into valuing a conventional proposal without much hard proof that its claims will be substantiated in practice. Thus, for instance, there are accepted ways of promoting health or

working with “at-risk” kids that aren’t always subjected to the same hard scrutiny just because they are familiar and are already part of the social service funding culture. I’ve seen funders spit out arts-oriented proposals for lack of acceptable proof that they will work while jargon-filled, comfort-zone-based conventional proposals are swallowed like pabulum. So to me, one thing that’s needed is a real fresh look at how “success” and “proof” are defined. Success needs to be reframed in a more embodied, humane way (not just in numbers, but in self-reporting by participants on the depth of experience, their feelings, etc.), in a whole-person way.

Second, where success has been defined in a whole-person way, stateside foundations both small and large have conducted successful experiments in supporting social development through community-based arts, though the support hasn’t been sustained. A similar lack of continuity is true at the federal level too. When new public or private leadership arrives, common practice is to end or radically transform old programs to put the new leaders’ stamp on things. If you graph funding trends over time, you’ll see that, for a few years here and there, a meaningful commitment nourished a lot of creative, effective community arts activity addressing social concerns. Then funds were shifted to other things for reasons having little or nothing to do with the value of the work, putting community cultural development practitioners back at square one, prospecting for project grants.

The recognition you are asking about has not been cumulative; it waxes and wanes. It’s as if the learning is written on sand, disappearing with a change of tide. This leads me to think the task is not to convince funders of the value of the work – this has been proven time and again. Rather, the task is to urge and assist a continuity of support and cumulative learning among funders. It’s time to stop treating this as an emergent phenomenon: recognize that it has fully emerged and needs sustenance.

#### Jamie Haft

You begin your chapter on Public Awareness with the assertion that the field’s most fundamental need is legitimization. What role, if any, can funders, in tandem with professional arts training and conservatory programs, play in this regard?

#### Arlene Goldbard

It’s been interesting to see the recent proliferation of U.S.-based academic programs relating to community arts. This suggests that people are beginning to see the work as distinct, with its own values and practices and thus its own training needs. I’m not sure what to make of the fact that the academy is coming to see this work as a viable path for students just when many of the major funders have pulled back. I hope academic interest will inspire

that they were exceeding achievement targets, the Centre got involved in the first place for a different reason. Something else, something hard to grasp, was going on. Arlene pinpoints it with her question, “How do we judge the success of an innovative, transformative process?” (p. 77) The transformative connection with meaning is stressed in Arlene’s book and reinforces the approach Urban Learning Space is using. She is eloquent on this subject (section 7, p. 58): “Artists have roles as agents of transformation that are more socially valuable than mainstream art world roles – and certainly equal in legitimacy.”

#### Nick Rabkin

A couple of years ago the RAND Corporation released a study, commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, called *Gifts of the Muse*. *Gifts* noted that much public advocacy for the arts was constructed to parry the political assaults of social and political conservatives who framed the arts as elitist, sometimes contemptible, and generally without significant public value. Advocates seized on the “instrumental” values of the arts – the contributions the arts make to learning, cross-cultural understanding, economic development, or social capital, for example – to build their case. The idea that the arts can contribute to community development – that is, to the organized efforts of low-income community residents to improve conditions and shape their futures – is fundamentally instrumental. RAND argued that the strategy has dubious merit. First, the report asserted that research on which the claims were based was, at best, inconclusive. And second, RAND argued that the arts would rise or fall, ultimately, not on their instrumental benefits but on their “intrinsic” value. On its face, the RAND position would appear to oppose Arlene’s perspective on the value of process in community settings.

But, I think there is an interesting alignment of *Gifts of the Muse* and *New Creative Community*. RAND did not find the intrinsic value of the arts in the art work itself, but in the “experience of the art.” It reasoned that if people do not have deeply meaningful personal “experiences” with the arts, they are not likely to become active supporters. Unequivocal proof that the arts drive economic development or higher SAT scores would not be enough to mobilize much political support for the arts if the arts experience itself is not valued. *Gifts* implied that too few people actually were having these deeply meaningful experiences, in spite of the “quality” of the available offerings. (As a result, *Gifts* was not, shall we say, warmly received everywhere in the arts community.)

RAND’s study never quite gets to the next logical question – what makes an arts experience deep and meaningful? But it does offer some preliminary thoughts, and they have a great deal to do with what Arlene would call “process.” Rather than alienating audiences by packaging and

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presenting the arts as high ticket consumer items produced by the exquisitely talented for the highly educated, *Gifts* argues that audiences need to be brought into (or at least closer to) the creative process. At the bottom of meaningful artistic experiences is a heightened awareness of the possibility of human creativity, including one's own. That can happen in a Broadway theater, but it is not the intention of Broadway producers. They can produce magic, wonder, and even awe, but only rarely do they invite the audience to join the artists' creative community, not even metaphorically. This it seems to me, is the great power of community cultural development. It makes the invitation. And in this sense, it represents an answer to the problem posed by *Gifts of the Muse*. Community cultural development invites people to become cultural producers, not just consumers, and artistic production is the most powerful and moving of artistic experiences.

*Jennifer Williams*

Building on Nick's point, Arlene consistently draws attention to the underlying values that drive the practice: "The values of community cultural development are humane, fluid, and relational. They are grounded in the conviction...that pluralism makes more sense as a positive value than as a problem statement...." It is understanding this aspect of community cultural development that must be deepened. We have to increase our collective awareness of what people trained in the arts actually bring to people in community, social, and educational settings.

If in the last decade or so of the twentieth century we were realizing that problems in society are interconnected, giving birth as a result to "The New Hybridity," as Arlene suggests in her chapter of that name (p.172), I believe now we are entering what Dutch futurist, Bert Mulder calls a "period of transformation." Society is transforming into an information society, which at its heart has meaning as a basic requirement. Artists create meaning. Indeed, artists are often at the forefront of new thinking: "The projects by younger artists ... are intrinsically cross-bred, conceived as fusions of conventional art and educational or physical community development, or of independent media and activist organizing." (p.179)

There is a particular urgency to get good at understanding the ways that the creative process contributes to human and community development. The need is not to allow artists and arts organizations to be "used" better, but allow them to become central to what society needs next: the incorporation of creativity and innovation at every stage of shaping a world defined much more than it is today by equality of opportunity and respect for diverse points of view.

funders to think again, because both funders and professional training programs can do a great deal to promote visibility.

I would like to see an effort directed at deepening practice and discourse, not only at promoting projects. For example, in my talks and workshops around the country in conjunction with the publication of *New Creative Community*, one of the most-requested topics is "the ethics of community arts practice," a subject I find incredibly rich and engrossing. People are hungry for chances to explore the intersection of personal values and integrity with social and practical concerns. This kind of exploration is essential to good curriculum too, to ensure that the work is not conveyed merely as a collection of techniques. I'd love to see a conference on ethics that yielded a book-length essay collection by practitioners and teachers, which would in turn be a wonderful resource for funders, academics, students, and practitioners. And ethics is only one such subject ripe for attention. The best contribution now would be convening people from all these fields as equals, bringing all they know into deep dialogue, yielding increased recognition in the form of publications, moving-image media, and online resources.

*About the participants in this discussion*

*Dudley Cocks is trustee, Bush Foundation; director, Roadside Theater; interim director, Appalshop, the Appalachian cultural center that is home base for his work; and serves on GLA's board of directors.*

*Arlene Goldbard is an independent writer and consultant who works with a wide variety of public and private agencies, most of them involved in cultural policy, artistic production and distribution, and cultural development planning and evaluation.*

*Jamie Haft will graduate from New York University's Tisch School of the Arts spring 2007.*

*Nick Rabkin is executive director, Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College Chicago. He is co-author of Putting the Arts in the Picture: Reframing Education in the 21st Century and in the past has been senior program officer for the arts at the MacArthur Foundation (1991-2001), and Chicago's deputy commissioner of cultural affairs.*

*Jennifer Williams is director of the UK's nonprofit Centre for Creative Communities, which she founded in 1978. The Centre is committed to building sustainable communities where creativity and learning play pivotal roles. As an artist, Jennifer often combines visual and performance art with her policy and evaluation work.*