

Art and Upheaval

Artists on the World's Frontlines

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"The frontlines are everywhere"

I **WORK IN A FIELD** broadly defined as community arts. While "community arts" may be a modern term, it actually describes an activity that is quite old. It basically involves artists and their fellow citizens coming together to make art (paintings, performances, poetry and the like) that in some way reflects their common concerns. From time to time I am asked to talk about what I do. Early in 2007, I opened a speech at the Artworks Conference in Virginia with the following:

Imagine working in a theater company for no money, 12 hours a day, six days a week, crafting performances that few will ever see that could land you in jail.

Imagine hundreds of newly minted art school graduates whose number one goal is to use their talent and creativity to advance democracy and economic justice across the land.

Imagine a solo exhibit of paintings as one of the only visual records of a reign of terror in which over two million people died.

Imagine an internationally recognized writers' program, forced into bankruptcy and burned to the ground at the hands of an undercover government agent.

Imagine street performance and graffiti art that somehow help to bring down a brutal despot and end a decade of war.

Imagine having to cancel your afterschool dance class due to local bombing.

Imagine a Supreme Court building that is an art gallery devoted to human rights with judges as docents.

Imagine having to sit down with rival militia leaders to negotiate the individual lines of your community play.

Imagine poetry readings conducted at the barrel of a gun.

Imagine waking up everyday knowing that your work as an artist, as a curator, even as an arts administrator, is critical to the survival of your people.

Imagine knowing that your art making could get you killed, but doing it anyway.

Many of those in the audience that day were surprised to learn that none of these scenes had been made up. Their surprise turned to shock when they learned that one of the more extreme scenarios from my list was home-grown. As I recounted the story of the 1973 burning of the Watts Writers Workshop by a man working for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, I could sense a subtle shift among my listeners. They had assumed that my talk about "artists on the world's frontlines" was going to be about other places, dangerous places, far removed from their own experience. Afterwards we had a lively discussion. Many commented that learning how their own fearful government had silenced a little community writers program brought home the fact that we all have assumptions that need to be questioned. Another, an artist herself, shared that she knew from personal experience that telling true stories can be dangerous. One young man summed it all up for me when he said, "We have to realize that the frontlines are everywhere."

The scenes I shared in my talk are snapshots from the voyage of inspiration and learning that led to the creation of this book. This journey has given me a new, and often unexpected, appreciation of the power and persistence of the human creative spirit. It has also taken me to some truly remarkable places, like Watts, Phnom Penh, Soweto and Belgrade—places that have come and gone from the world's headlines, places we know as scenes of upheaval and tragedy.

Hard Questions

In early 1999, I was invited to give a talk at a conference in Northern Ireland sponsored by Belfast's Community Arts Forum (CAF). While I was there, I was introduced to a consortium of community theater groups who, with CAF's assistance, were undertaking a bold and risky theater project dealing with one of Northern Ireland's most conflict-ridden issues—marriages between Protestants and Catholics.

I was enthralled. Over the years I had been associated with many community theater projects in the US that had tackled difficult, even dangerous issues, but this was different. After nearly 40 years of oppressive and relentless conflict, Northern Ireland's citizens were holding their collective breaths amidst a tenuous truce between Republican (Catholic) and Loyalist (Protestant) paramilitaries. Everybody was lying low, keeping quiet, and trying not to make waves. But the community members behind *The Wedding* had a different idea. If the peace negotiations facilitated by US Senator George Mitchell actually bore fruit, Northern Ireland's Protestant and Catholic communities would need more than a cease-fire to heal the country. People of good will on both sides of the "peace line" would need a protected space to explore common ground. They saw a cross-community theater project as worth the risk.

The production, *The Wedding Community Play*, did, in fact, come into being. In early November of 1999, I flew to Belfast to see the final two performances. The play was presented in four venues—a Protestant house, a Catholic house,

a community church and a reception hall. After assembling at the CAF offices, I and my fellow audience members were transported by bus to the first two locations where we crowded into the bedrooms, kitchens, and living rooms of the two homes.

As the play unfolded all the hurt, rage, humor, and hopefulness that had defined Northern Ireland's quest for justice and peace were shared with an audience that, by the final curtain, had become a part of a newly constituted, cross-community family. By the fourth act, it was hard to tell when the "theatrical" wedding reception ended and the post-performance party had begun. Needless to say, it was an extraordinary work of transformational theater.

The mounting of *The Wedding* was a perilous endeavor. Every line in the play was negotiated over and over with the participants and with the paramilitaries. Many members of the cast were warned that their involvement could be construed as a betrayal of one community or another. Some dropped out over disagreements or as a safety measure. But most saw it through. And in the end, in the words of one of the participants, they created a "powerful and very public symbol that had more impact on the community than all the violence that occurred during its making."

Following *The Wedding Play* through the dangerous social and political minefields of its creation, coming to know the lives and histories of the people involved, inspired me and humbled me. It opened my eyes to how little I actually knew about this thing I had studied my entire career—this simple, complex, confounding, unpredictable, magical and powerful thing we call human creativity.

My Belfast experience also reminded me that as a white American male I could choose whether or not to confront many of the "hard questions" that were unavoidable for most of my colleagues in the community art field. Hard questions like:

Whose story is this? Who defines success for this work? To whom are you accountable? Whose voice is missing? What's the downside here, and who will be left holding the bag if it fails?

I realized it had been too long since I had queried the assumptions informing my own work. Over the preceding decade, I had challenged many students and colleagues to grapple with the difficult and unsettling questions that are intrinsic to community art making. Yet, while I had been calling on others to examine their suitability and motivation, pages of my own evolving story remained unturned and unquestioned. Put another way, after Belfast, I was no longer comfortable in my own shoes. It was time to confront my own hard questions.

Search Engine

Unsettled and inspired. What better state of mind to begin reexamining a life's work. I started by writing an article about *The Wedding* for the Community Arts Network. I also came up with a series of questions to frame my curriculum, so to speak. Many of them were not new, but I felt they all needed revisiting:

What spurs our individual and collective creativity? Is the healing power of human creativity equal to our obvious genius for wreaking havoc? Is trauma a creative trigger—are humans wired to create in the face of chaos and destruction? Why are artists so universally feared by despots? Can the arts mitigate fear or change our perceptions of “the enemy”? How do the arts help us make sense and meaning? And, on the flip side, how can it do harm?

Searching for answers to questions like these led me to numerous discussions with colleagues and, as is my habit, I continued to write. Eventually, the idea of a book emerged as an excuse to continue the enquiry, albeit in a more structured way. After more research and discussion, a kind of focus emerged for the project. Using my Belfast experience as a template, I would explore artists working in communities facing extreme social, political and environmental crises—namely war and disaster zones. My questions would be a starting point, but, as with my earlier book, *Art in Other Places*, I would let the stories take the lead. I was not interested in doing a comprehensive survey of creative output in places in turmoil. Rather, I wanted to find individual artist’s stories that somehow showed how and why the creative impulse rises up in these situations.

When I shared the idea with some colleagues and prospective publishers, some were encouraging, but others (mostly publishers) thought I was crazy. One said, “Sure you might stumble on a stray artist trying to survive in the trenches but no artist worth their salt is going to be willing or able to do serious work in these conditions.” I knew the naysayers were wrong, but I had no idea how wrong until I started digging deeply into the subject. After a few months of reading, internet searches and overseas phone calls, I had found over 300 examples of what I was beginning to call “art and upheaval.” Since then, many, many more have emerged. The list grows every day.

Here is a small sample of what I discovered:

- British theater workers using drama to introduce democracy to decommissioned child soldiers in Eritrea
- Conceptual artists helping homeless and hunted children in Rio’s favelas to use media to tell their story
- Social Soaps (soap operas) disseminating lifesaving information on radios and televisions all over the world
- Modern dance giving voice to forgotten refugees in Gaza and the West Bank
- Artists responding to trauma victims in the immediate and long term aftermath of the Columbine shootings
- A Yemeni poet and army officer using poetry to combat gangsters and terrorism in rural villages
- A Tanzanian theatre group using drama to learn why women in that country were not participating in elections
- A traveling performance highlighting the dangers of AIDS to Vietnamese teens

- A Liberian musician's struggle to promote democracy in the midst of corruption and war
- Puppeteers in Argentina helping Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in their fight for justice for the disappeared

Among the swelling file folders, patterns began to emerge. Some were short-term crisis interventions. Others had longer term aims, but had fallen on hard times due to deteriorating conditions or lack of resources. A good number had been initiated from outside the crisis area by artists and/or organizations working with locals. Many of these programs, particularly in Africa and Eastern Europe, were driven by artists from Western countries. The issues and conditions being addressed ran the gamut. In these places, art making was helping to mediate conflicts, rebuild economies, heal unspeakable trauma, and give new voice to the forgotten and disappeared. Health issues were among the most prominent, with AIDs education and women's reproductive health topping the list. Another common use of artistic resources was with young people traumatized by war and natural disaster.

Six Communities

Put simply, the stories in this book chose themselves. It's not that any of them lobbied to be represented, in fact, a number of them did quite a bit to discourage my entreaties. As my research expanded, I found that the stories that held the most promise for me had a number of things in common. First, and most importantly, was whether they were ready to be told. Early on in my research, on a trip to New Zealand, I had a sit-down with a drum and dance troupe formed by refugees from the Rwandan genocide. As we began to talk, their initial enthusiasm for sharing their story quickly dissipated as they realized that they simply could not bear the telling.

One of the most important elements to me was that the central figures of each story be members of the communities in which they were working. I was also drawn to artists' stories that spanned the historical events that contextualized their work. For many of the "upheavals" in question, this meant creative biographies that stretched two or more decades. Another attraction was intense collaboration. I liked the possibility that the central narrative would, by definition, connect to others. The only question was, Could I contain the bounty?

Eventually, stories from six communities on five continents came to the fore. They are set in Northern Ireland, Cambodia, South Africa, Watts, California, Maralinga, Australia, and the former Yugoslavia. The artistic disciplines represented are diverse as well; visual, performing and literary artists are all in the mix. A few stories, like *The Wedding*, have a climactic event as a focus. Others center on a group or organization responding to unfolding events over time. Each is distinguished by deeply intense relationships among members of a close, often beleaguered group. The crises they confront exemplify a mix of issues

and conditions: war, dictatorship, human rights, AIDS, poverty, racism—sadly, the list goes on. And along the way, they all encounter enormous physical and emotional obstacles, not the least of which is an active and powerful opposition. It would be grossly inaccurate to describe the politics that permeates these accounts as anything other than “vicious.”

Settling on the six narratives certainly brought greater focus to my task, and, as I began to engage the artists, and explore the complicated histories surrounding their work, I realized that *Art and Upheaval* was going to be a very long road. *Art in Other Places* had introduced readers to the newly emerging, and largely unknown, community arts movement in the US. In order to reflect the field's diversity, each of the book's 22 chapters had been written as a compact portrayal of a different artist's journey. This book would be a very different undertaking. In it, I would be crossing borders into “global hot spots.” Telling these stories responsibly would require more than a summary of news accounts and a few pictures. It would necessitate knowing the people and the places firsthand. Most importantly, it would call for a level of trust and partnership that could not be forced. I understood that the messy interplay of desperate lives and communities in turmoil had to be approached deliberately, with caution, and with the utmost respect. This, I knew, would take time.

Patterns

One could argue that these artists had no option but to react in the ways they did. After all, most were literally trapped in the tumult surrounding them. Still, amidst the fear and disorder some responded creatively, sometimes with nuance and sensitivity; others with bold strokes. That they decided to push back against the toxic tides and stay the course as creators is the most indelible pattern that runs through these stories. Although the Watts Prophets clearly desired broader recognition, they persisted with their brutally confrontive poetics and spurned any number of “Hollywood record deals” that demanded a gentler tone as a quid pro quo—a persistence that eventually attracted more attention from the FBI than it did deal makers. Similarly, in Phnom Penh, Ly Daravuth and Ingrid Maun could easily have laid low in their modest Situations Gallery ignoring the culture decomposing around them. Certainly Belfast's community theater artists could have avoided a great deal of heartache and political heat by confining their work to their own communities. They all chose, instead, to defy expectation and do what artists are always doing—challenging convention and imagining a different story with a different outcome.

Without being overly dramatic, one could posit that these performers, painters and poets made difficult, even foolhardy, choices in dangerous circumstances. Yet, if you ask them, to a person, they would describe their circumstances as absent of choice. This is one of the recurring conundrums that shout out from these narratives. “Of course,” they would say, “there were many possible turns, but no question as to which one we would take.” And, now, knowing

these creators, their stories, and the long rough seas they all navigated, I can see the pure and unavoidable truth in that.

Another recurring aspect of these sagas is the elusive quality of the "frontlines" themselves. Given that they take place in incendiary places like Belfast, Watts and Belgrade, one might assume that the antagonists populating these stories would be familiar to us. Predictable shibboleths like Milosevic, Pol Pot, and the South African security forces appear for sure, but, truth be told, less facile demons dominate the action. In these dramas, fear, greed, indifference, denial, zealotry, bigotry, betrayal, and, most prominently, a failure of imagination, crowd the stage. They are represented by conscripted soldiers, faceless government functionaries and next door neighbors— everyday people trying to survive.

The opposite is true for the creators who make these stories worth telling. They, too, are what one might call, "everyday people." Few of them are widely known outside of their communities. Yet, these performers, poets and painters chose a starkly different path in the face of brutality, intimidation and hopelessness. They opted to speak out, to fight back, to draw the line, to recover, to heal, and ultimately to survive. And in these narratives they are joined by others: fellow artists, community members, housewives, students, veterans, shopkeepers, pensioners—fellow travelers who find solace and courage and who discover the power of their own voices.

I would be remiss if I did not point out that as unique as they are, these stories did not unfold in a creative vacuum. Surrounding each was a robust, often hidden, ecology of fellow creators responding individually and collectively to the difficult circumstances. I should also note that none of the artists portrayed here saw themselves as particularly heroic or exceptional. They took great pains to describe their work in the context of community and collaboration.

Stepping back from the intensity of current events, it is important to recognize that this form of artistic behavior is not at all a modern phenomenon. Throughout history human beings have used their creative powers to confront destructive forces. The shaman, often described as the pre-art artist, assumed the primary responsibility for healing and mediation by means of music, dance and symbolic imagery. Throughout history artists have continued their association with these roles. In the Middle Ages, artists and early physicians shared the same guild. Performances, visual art and verse have long been used to advance the aims and ideas of liberal thinkers and peacemakers. Euripides, whose *Trojan Women* is often referred to as the first anti-war and anti-misogynist play, said, "God hates violence." Though largely unacknowledged, museums throughout the world contain a huge volume of images and artifacts created by artists challenging authoritarian and militaristic worldviews.

That these alternate voices do not share space with the epic tales of military triumph and tragedy that fill our history books and museums is no mystery. Nonetheless, this impulse has always been there. I suppose that is why I was

drawn to these stories, as they offer such a very different picture of human potential in the face of evil.

It would not be unreasonable to argue that art has little potency in the face of violence and repression. But evidence to the contrary comes from some of our century's most brutal despots. Historically, those intent on eliminating opposition and suppressing popular dissent have made a priority of quickly eliminating creators and thinkers from their midsts. One has only to note how intently East Germany's *Stasi* (secret police) focused on the systematic intimidation of the country's artists to stifle initial opposition to hard-line communist rule. It can also be seen in Chile, where in the early 1970s dictator Augusto Pinochet imprisoned and "disappeared" so many of that country's creators in order to assure social control. In these pages, you will encounter this insidious pattern again and again, most notably in Cambodia where the Khmer Rouge took only three months to annihilate nearly all of that country's artistic community.

It is highly ironic that these brutal regimes seem so much more aware of the potential power of artistic creativity than cultures we consider more "civilized". It is even more alarming to examine how readily these tyrants used the arts to advance their own evil purposes. Hitler, history's most notorious artist, is known not only for his suppression of "degenerate art" but also his lavish and effective use of symbol and ritual to advance the ideals of the Third Reich. Slobodan Milosevic, whom you will encounter later in these pages, is often described as Hitler's equal when it comes to the theatrical manipulation of public opinion. Even Pol Pot, another character here, and an enemy of culture if ever there was one, understood the power of story and song to radically alter human behaviors and beliefs.

Eureka?

What have I discovered? It would do a disservice to the depth and complexity of these stories to try to distill their essences into bullet points. I believe the narratives themselves, particularly the verbatim reflections of the people represented, are the truest source for whatever wisdom and meaning they contain. Individual readers will, of course encounter these remarkable odysseys with their own biographies in tow. This is the reason I have tried to let these stories and their characters represent themselves—to allow readers to meet them on their own terms, with their own questions. I will say, though, that many of my own questions, the ones that informed and impelled this quest, have been touched and altered. In the end, what I come away with is not a proven hypothesis, but rather a clearer sense of what I know about human imagination and creativity and our ceaseless pursuit of meaning.

I have come to know that if you scratch the surface of a human disaster you will find creators responding to the most difficult of circumstances, making art to live, to eat, to kindle the human spirit, to bring peace or to resolve conflict. In these circumstances, you will also find art makers manifesting

beauty in the face of horror, and revealing the ugly truth in the face of denial. They are doing this to rally, or bring order, to educate and inspire, to entertain, to heal, but most of all, to tell the story—the hidden story, the story denied. And once revealed, the story's telling is never in doubt whether told directly, obtusely, in code, as a joke, as a song in a pub, a poem or a painting on the wall, as a play unfolding in a cramped living room, or as a dance of angels on the dark and sinister streets.

This is the creative landscape that I found on my journey of the past eight years. The truth is, that in the face of destruction, we are impelled to create. Upheaval begets both crises and opportunity. Shiva dances to create as well as destroy. It's a survival impulse that I am not sure we have any control over. In the face of the unfathomable, the senseless, the cruel, the devastating, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of making meaning.

Some would say that this is our great hope in a time of unprecedented global crises, that the only way out of the death spiral we have imposed on our planet will be the creation of a new, countervailing creation dance. I would say that one of the simple messages, repeated over and over in the following pages, is that humankind already knows this dance and practices it every day. With each sunrise these "new stories" are rising up in what most would consider the least fertile of fields. It is unfortunate that we seem to look to the safe and often sterile places (the academy, city hall, TV) for the insight needed for our most difficult questions. It is equally unfortunate that the kind of messy miracle stories that populate these pages rarely see the light of day.

So here are ten stories from six communities about art and upheaval. If the creative powers called up by the extreme crises depicted in them can be marshaled to help us recover our earth community, then I believe there is hope. Please know, however, that these stories are not presented as evidence of a second coming entitled, "art conquers evil." As I said at the beginning of this introduction, these are snapshots of sagas that, like the circumstances that spawned them, are far from over. Despite their significant histories, they are very fragile. Most are focused on keeping their head above water. In the tyranny of the urgent, getting the story out has not been a priority. I am honored to have been entrusted with that task. Considered separately, these stories are compelling and inspiring. Taken together, I believe they constitute a body of experience and wisdom from which we can learn a great deal about how human creativity can help us heal the deepest and most destructive of our self-inflicted wounds.