

Keynote  
Creative Convergence  
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“What Matters Now?”

*Point and turn game – a simple exercise to illustrate the power of the imagination.*

A few weeks ago, I participated in a wonderful conference at McGill. This gathering was part of an ongoing, multiyear project using arts interventions to address issues of sexual violence experienced by young women in indigenous communities in Canada and in South Africa. The current phase of the project was to explore and evaluate the impact of these interventions. Young indigenous women from across Canada, most of them from the North, some still in their teens, spoke about how participation in the arts, creating video and cellfilms, stories, photovoice, music and even a book, has not only enabled them to deal with the effects of sexual violence that they, themselves, or people they knew had experienced, but that these creative processes had also empowered them to lead dialogue about these issues with their families, with their broader communities and even to suggest policies that could move change forward. They spoke with clarity and courage. It was very moving.

This is just one example of how community-engaged art for social change (or ASC) can truly liberate, educate, validate and activate - in three levels of transformation: the micro (individual); meso (group or community) and macro (systems). Definitions can be problematic and language is slippery; our team describes ASC as groups of people, who may not self-identify as artists, working together to create art in performance arts – music, theatre, dance, in visual, literary, digital and urban arts, about what matters to them, this process facilitated by a specially-trained artist. In ASC, the artmaking process is often as important or more important than the ultimate products that are created. We estimate that there are some 500 organizations currently doing forms of this work across the country. Almost always working in partnership with community-based organizations, and often exploring specific issues, ASC differs from arts therapy and recreational arts; it is also different from “outreach” programs that are designed to “develop” or increase arts audiences. ASC has its own unique goals, methods, pedagogy and scholarship.

We have institutionalized the arts – created a vertical hierarchy of values, placing large, mainstream organizations at the top and your daughter singing about her dog at the bottom, with myriad other forms (community choirs, pottery classes, etc.) in between. (*Demonstrate a vertical line of mainstream arts organizations situated at the top of the line; shift the line to a horizontal axis and then attach the two ends of the spectrum to create a circle illustrating the interconnectedness – the ecology of all arts participation.*) I believe it’s important to value ALL of these elements.

Too bad that, despite all its rhetoric about community engagement, the Canada Council for the Arts has eliminated this discipline from its formal “fields of practice”, contrary to the history of its inclusion at the Council as a its own, unique art practice. (There had been grants programs in support of community-engaged arts since 1997.)

If ASC is to be done richly and safely, its facilitation requires not just artistic knowledge but also a large toolbox that includes dialogue and group process skills; knowledge of community development approaches and skills for the creation and sustainability of partnerships. We have recently developed and delivered a two-year graduate program in ASC and are currently planning a national mentorship program...more about this later.

Around the world, ASC is rooted in issues of social, environmental, educational and political justice...a form of cultural democracy designed to nurture insight, exchange and action. We see it in myriad contexts – in work with youth and seniors, in conflict resolution, education, immigrant settlement, agendas for mental and physical health, in work people with cognitive or physical challenges, as a facet of cultural celebration and revitalization, in addressing environmental and intercultural challenges, for the creation of inclusive public policy and in processes of community economic development. Or it can simply explore and share what it is like to be a teenager.

I am confident of my facts... in part because of the six-year ASC! Research Project which has just completed in August. This study was the first of its kind in our country and involved over 50 researchers, hundreds of individual participants and dozens of community-based organizations. We’ve produced more than 200 outputs, many of them designed as open source resources for others to use, including an interactive online evaluation tool; the ASC Web, a categorized series of videos culled from 600 hours of documentation; the Artist Speak interview series; peer-reviewed journal articles and essays; videos about our field study programs, policy recommendations and a book! Most are available on the website of ICASC, the International Centre of Arts for Social Change. ([www.icasc.ca](http://www.icasc.ca)) where you can find a recently-posted public report that includes links to these and many other open source resources.

I know I am preaching to the converted here – no one in this room needs to be convinced of the positive impacts that artmaking as an expression of what we care about can heal give voice and empower individuals and whole communities. I am talking about artmaking not buying/consuming art.

I do, however, want to focus through a particular lens. Not a close-up but a wide shot, a view that is becoming more and more essential as the world is increasingly in jeopardy - not just because of climate change, huge, growing inequality, and political and corporate corruption...but also because of a retrenchment, a retreat to mechanistic, non-relationship-based, less empathetic, organizationally rigid and more technocratic/data-driven, bureaucratic ways of approaching complex issues. I believe much of this is based in fear. And fear is rampant. Just look at our very high levels of anxiety, depression and suicide rates in this country,

especially amongst young people but also in the general population. And fear generates risk aversion and territoriality.

As educators, researchers, policy makers and champions of the right to express what matters, I believe that we **MUST** begin to position the work we do within broader landscapes. I know that many of us are currently battling to hang on to the territory we *have* – but those first two levels of positive transformation – the micro and the meso – will be harder and harder to sustain unless we address the many systems within which we, ourselves, work. Perhaps you are lucky to be operating in an entirely supportive context but as you well know, the arts and humanities are not at the top of most priorities in education, health, economic development and many other systems. Arts and humanities are under attack.

I recently facilitated some hands-on workshops for a ministry of the federal government in Ottawa; the participants were trying to figure out how best to create programs that could address ongoing and growing racism across the country. As often happens, they expressed amazement at their own creative powers to approach these complex questions through the use of metaphor – through artmaking and dialogue. But more astonishing for me was that only when we were finishing up, did several of them reveal that they had filed official complaints about the racism that they, themselves, had experienced in their own departments. The air in the room was electric – and – when these folks revealed their own anguish and frustration, whole new possibilities began to open up. The personal is political.

The skills of critical response, dialogue and listening – and the inclusion of metaphor, of poetry and, may I add, **beauty**, can deepen and widen perspectives across difference. But when social justice, our right to a life of wellbeing, to live within systems that are inclusive and responsive ... when our rights to expression - to voice - are subsumed, denied, ignored...we can and must encourage colleagues and students to consider and act to address the sources of these inequities. We must have the courage to act even when the challenges can be overwhelming. As someone reflected in a recent workshop, “There are some systems that are almost impossible to change but small actions can create the beginnings of progress.”

All systems, whether human-made or in the natural world are intertwined. Especially now, as our demographics are changing radically, as coalition-building becomes a major element of activism (especially for young people), I strongly believe that one way forward for engaged arts and arts education is to look outside the silos within which we usually operate. We have a formidable set of tools enabling us to break through and connect with other changemakers, to share perspectives and practices. Arts creation processes are reflective; they demand risk-taking, reflection, comfort with ambiguity, and, especially in group creation processes, listening and dialogue. These are very effective tools; they build new forms of trust and exchange. And collaboration across disciplines and sectors increases impact.

We must engage in critical thinking to find a way through the complexities of making systems change. But nothing will move forward without the development of new relationship-building, the creation of respect, insistence on reciprocity and equal voice. And we have another

challenge: we live in a hit and run society...quick fixes, instant gratification, little time for reflection and even less for breath and uncompetitive play. The head, heart and spirit need time and space to flourish. How to find the **time** for reflection – to recognize and react to what some call “stop” moments...that tug on the sleeve that asks “Why is this important?”

Lastly, for me, connecting the mind, body and spirit is core. Descartes did us no favours! I think it was Martha Graham who said “the body does not lie!” Our bodies are the repositories of memory, of trauma and of identity. In many contexts, relationship to our bodies can be very complex and so, for me, this focus in ASC work becomes essential.

*Speaking of the body: Gesture circles: one person makes a simple gesture and then the others copy them, the process repeated around a circle. What happens? (The importance of play, paying attention to others, breaking down inhibitions, waking up the body, etc.)*

Some years ago I led a workshop with English literature graduate students and faculty at the University of the Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan where open liberal thought was, to put it lightly, not encouraged. A simple hide and seek game that involved identifying secret “enemies” and “protectors”, usually just a playful physical warm up, became impossible. People just stopped moving. In what was an oppressive system, the possibility of betrayal was very present although unspoken, and it surfaced in a simple game. This moment led to deep discussion about how best to deal with these issues.

Now some questions. What matters to you now? What matters to your colleagues or those you teach? How does a more inclusive perspective and action affect how effective you are? How can you advance innovative changes to the structures within which you work? How to open those closed doors to advocate, to listen? How best to frame our messages so they can be heard by those who are unaware or simply have closed their doors? How can we work with others who share our concerns - people whose work may be happening outside our own discipline or sector?

Another example: in Port Hardy, a BC community that had lost most of its three resource-based industries and two thirds of its population, twenty-six participants took part in an ASC workshop to imagine possible futures for the town. The mayor, educators, youth, members of the Chamber of Commerce, representatives from youth-centred organizations and social services, as well as from the neighboring First Nations reserve, used artmaking to begin an inclusive process for revitalization of their community. Residents many of whom had never spoken with each other, managed to create a way forward for the town.

At the age of 72, I am cautiously optimistic when thinking about the inclusion of the arts across disciplines and sectors...how we can humanize the bottom line and provide alternatives to technocratic sensibilities that dictate the way our world seems to be going. The doors ARE opening to alternate ways of solving complex problems, mostly because the old ways are not working.

Over the last two years I've had 56 meetings with federal politicians and government officials in Ottawa, each time advocating for the inclusion of the arts in diverse agendas for change...in public health, immigration settlement, environmental education, economic development and in many other areas. Understanding of the impacts of arts-based activities is growing and these days, I often suggest that colleagues consider applying for financial support from public and private programs outside of the usual arts-focused ones. At present, there are no mechanisms to help identify these possibilities...a good project for someone to take on!

Young people are leading the way, developing coalitions and many innovative approaches to making real change. As always, many young artists want to change the world and, in this context, mentorship becomes super important. (One major finding of our research is that mentorship is a high priority in Canada.) We are planning to launch a national mentorship program next year, pairing experienced artists with less-experienced ones in which both are paid for their work during a six-month program they design themselves.

Let's take a moment to play: (Introduce the "energy ball" game, sending and receiving an imaginary ball of energy around the room.)

So here's good news: many alternative and effective arts-infused projects are proving the impact of collaboration across disciplines and sectors...new forms that are youth led; that are social enterprises or involve bartering or crowd sourcing; that place artists on city councils and chambers of commerce. We see local restaurants hosting neighborhood art-making events about new visions for their community; elementary school students clean up a shoreline or a park and then create art about what that felt like; bag-free lunches are made the rule in high school, each bag artfully designed by a student; First Nations elders take people on excursions to connect them with the land, this leading to reflection about climate change through artmaking; sex education is delivered through plays created by youth through ASC processes... all these projects bringing people together to explore and act on what matters to them.

I believe that we are living in a time of hunger for new ways of seeing and being in the world, for approaches that are imaginative and inclusive. Doors are opening for arts-based practices. We are at a pivotal moment for the advancement of the field of community-engaged art and it is only in inclusive collaboration with other sectors, that artist/practitioners and those working with them will be able to create sustainable, systemic change.

One last example: ASC workshops and dialogues with residents, businesses and schools located in Vancouver's West End resulted in the creation of a new arts and culture plan for this large and diverse neighborhood. (Reports on all projects mentioned in this presentation are available on the ICASC website.)

As circles of interest and practice expand, knowledge-exchange, networking and collaboration are essential if we are to be effective in our response to the urgent and critical questions we face in our communities and around the world.

Who is not in this room? Who can we invite? How best to explore new partnerships?

Perhaps it's useful to imagine a circle dance, everyone able to see and respond to each other.  
As the Walrus asked "Will you, won't you, will you, won't you join the dance?"