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Redefining the Movement: Art Activism

Michael Shank[1]

FOREWORD BY HOWARD ZINN*

When I think of the relationship between artists and society—and for me the question is always what it could be, rather than what it is—I think of the word *transcendent*. It is a word that I never use in public, but it is the only word I can come up with to describe how I think about the role of artists. By transcendent, I mean that the artist transcends the immediate, transcends the here and now, transcends the madness of the world. The artist thinks, acts, performs music, and writes outside the framework that society has created.

So the word *transcendent* comes to mind when I think of the role of the artist in dealing with the issues of the day. I use that word to suggest that the role of the artist is to transcend conventional wisdom, to transcend the word of the establishment, to transcend the orthodoxy, to go beyond. It is the job of the artist to transcend that—to think outside the boundaries. Fortunately, throughout history we have had artists who dared to do this.

This article dares to do this. The author beckons social justice practitioners to transcend traditional activism and provides a theoretical framework for doing so. Suggesting that art activism can transform the social justice movement, the author thinks outside the boundaries of conventional activism and "goes beyond" by proposing alternative advocacy models for a new generation of activists.

As a teacher and a writer, that is what I am interested in. I am not interested in just producing books, and I am not interested in just reproducing class after class of people who will get out, become successful,

and take their obedient places in the slots that society has prepared for them. What most of us must be involved in—whether we teach or write, make films, write films, direct films, play music, act, whatever we do—not only has to make people feel good and inspired and at one with other people around them, but also has to educate a new generation to do this very modest thing: change the world.

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I. INTRODUCTION: WINNING THE HEARTS AND MINDS

The social justice movement, known for its cornucopia of cognitive[2] communication styles that include irrefutable facts and figures, is about to experience an extreme makeover. The new look: an emotional one. Feelings are driving the politics of our post-9/11 society. The social justice movement, in its effort to win hearts and minds, must ensure that the advocate's toolkit is balanced with both emotional approaches (to win the hearts) and cognitive approaches (to win the minds). *Art activism*—a term coined to reference activism that utilizes the arts[3]—is precisely the tool for the job.

But first, a lesson learned from Senator John Kerry's campaign about the necessity of a balanced toolkit. President George W. Bush's team, unlike Kerry and crew, knew how to win hearts by staging emotional theater and, subsequently, molding the nation's feelings. Though, from a cognitive perspective, Bush's domestic and foreign track record has been disastrous, he knew how to access a voter's emotional pathway by speaking a charming, lilting "American" dialect; frankly rolling up shirtsleeves; incorporating symbols of Americana into the campaign (for example, truck, gun, ranch); and occasionally overwhelming himself with awkward rage.[4] Kerry's campaign assumed that the cognitive approach would secure him the presidential office, that a combination of devastating and convincing facts and figures would sway the nation.[5] And while, at the eleventh hour, Kerry unveiled his aptitude for the language of Americana by staging hunting photo opportunities,[6] his overall approach lacked emotional appeal. Facts about the Bush administration's mushrooming national debt, gross mismanagement of Iraq, deteriorating social services, and depleted or degraded natural resources were not sufficient. Senator Kerry needed a dose of emotional theatricality.

Accordingly, how can the social justice movement learn to access the emotional pathway, not merely the cognitive pathway? What lessons that

can be learned from Kerry's campaign are also relevant to the social justice movement? This article attempts to elucidate the theories behind art activism and offer practical tools for activists searching for methodologies that effectively access the emotional and cognitive pathways simultaneously. The arts are an emotionally powerful and transformative medium; using them must be done strategically and systematically. The responsibility of the art activist, after accessing the emotional pathway, is to carry the social justice message from the observer's emotional self to the observer's cognitive self. Artists frequently ignore the latter step and fail to articulate the message for the cognitive learner, while politicians frequently ignore the essential first step of accessing the emotional pathway and eagerly jump straight to the cognitive approach.

The transitional journey from the observer's emotional pathway to the cognitive pathway is enabled through a variety of arts-related postperformance or postexhibit talkback sessions, forums, facilitated dialogues, etc. When both emotional and cognitive pathways have been accessed, exercised, and challenged, the winning of the hearts and minds begins.

In an effort to expand art activism's capacity to create real social change, this article will (1) examine the theoretical framework behind art activism and art's efficacy in accessing emotional pathways; (2) explicate ways to strategically approach art activism through the use of specific case studies; and (3) explain one practical form of art activism—theater-based conflict resolution—that is transforming the ways communities are addressing social injustice.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ART ACTIVISM

Before engaging in the practice of art activism and "emotional accessing," a theoretical explanation for why emotional pathways are so easily accessed by art is necessary. The Social Games Theory (SGT) and the concept of *socially conditioned rationalities*[7] will provide activists with

essential clues into art's ability to access an observer's emotional pathway. This section will examine art's capacity to condition certain behaviors or rationalities within humans and explore ways in which activists can emotionally access their constituency through the resurrection of these conditioned behaviors and rationalities.

SGT advocates suggest that the development of decision-making skills, relational patterns, and rational processing, occurs entirely within social constructs and is socially embedded.[8] Furthermore, SGT theorists propose that participants raised in these disparate realities learn to subscribe to these separate, socially conditioned rationalities and behave accordingly.[9]

The notion of context-dependent rationality leads to the categorization and analysis of *institutionally specific rationalities,* for instance, in market, bureaucratic, political, religious, and family settings.[10] Germane to these examples is the institution of education, a social construct extremely relevant to the evaluation of arts-based approaches within the social justice movement since art studies are traditionally introduced within educational institutions. It is not uncommon for primary school students to be enlisted in dance, music, painting, photography, poetry, pottery, and/or theater classes, while preschool students are often intentionally kept preoccupied with pencil, crayon, and marker drawings, collage creations, and improvisational movement activities. Secondary school institutions, and even the latter stages of primary schools, however, are spending increasingly *less* time with artistic development and *more* time encouraging cognitive development in science, math, history, and grammar classes with the aim of equipping students with the skills to successfully pass standardized tests.[11] Despite secondary school policymakers' unwillingness to continue artistic cultivation throughout high school, it is highly probable that the foundation for an arts-based, institutionally specific rationality[12] has already been laid in the preschool and primary school periods.

The institution of art, witnessed within a preschool environment, encourages a range of positive, socially acceptable behavior. Children learn

to engage intuitively and nonjudgmentally in artistic expressions, developing a socially conditioned rationality that art, at least at that age, is a safe place to express oneself.[13] Art capitalizes on the intuitive self's ability to spontaneously express itself and provides a less judgmental framework than other school subjects in preschool and primary school.[14]

What remains nonjudgmental about art experiences for children in preschool and the early stages of public primary school is that artistic expressions are not subjected to the type of grading typical in math, science, history, and English classes such as grammar. In arts classes, at that level of schooling, answers are frequently less rigid, less defined, and retain the freedom to be painted outside the multiple-choice oval. This respect for freedom of expression in dance, music, painting, and theater socially conditions young artists that the institution of art is a safe place where judgment is withheld, respect is guaranteed, and intuition is welcomed. Consequently, social justice advocates desiring a different mode of behavior from their constituents can establish an artistic setting that evokes the desired, socially conditioned behavior (i.e., respectful and nonjudgmental behavior) and enables the existence of productive dialogue.

The socially conditioned rationalities embedded within art classes are distinctly unique from other social constructs experienced in preschool and primary school because they maintain few parameters dictating the course of action a student must take. Math, science, history, and grammar classes provide young students with little room to respond uniquely. The teacher knows the correct answers and the student is expected to discover them. What is socially conditioned in these classes is not autonomous behavior, a deep inner propensity all primates possess,[15] but rather a dependency upon the teacher for the right answer. Art, on the other hand, has fewer "right" answers in preschool and primary school and encourages students to experiment and make meaning in whatever creative, intuitive form they choose.

If rationality, choice, and interaction are indeed institutionally embedded,[16] then the social constructs encouraging safe and respectful artistic exploration among preschool students embed a social pattern on particularly fertile ground. Neuroscientists who have studied the ways in which children learn have discovered that "[p]reschool children have brains that are literally more active, more connected, and much more flexible than ours. From the point of view of neurology, they really are alien geniuses."[17] In the following excerpt, theorist Mary E. Clark, a prolific writer on social psychology, defends this idea that preschool children are vigorous learners, absorbing mass amounts of information: "By age 3, each neuron in a toddler's brain has about 15,000 synapses with other cells, six times as many as at birth, and many more than are present in an adult brain."[18] Therefore, it stands to reason that actions and rationalities learned during this flexible, synapse-centric developmental stage would be permanently stored in the learner's emotional or cognitive warehouse.

Social justice advocates wanting to resurrect previously learned, arts-based rationalities and the concomitant conditioned feelings of safety, cooperation, and respect tucked in the recesses of the human psyche may need a heavy dose of perseverance in order to whittle away at the dominant and competitive cognitive rationalities learned later in life. One particularly effective art form for circumventing this whittling process is music.

Music has the potential to yield substantial results in accessing emotional pathways when the cognitive pathways are stagnant or impregnable. Clark describes music's effect on the emotional pathway as follows:

> Music has several adaptive functions. One is its effect on emotions. Various combinations of notes, rhythms, and tempos communicate specific moods in those who hear them. An individual's brain waves become synchronized into a particular pattern, according to the nature of the music being heard. From the serenity of lullabies to the aggressiveness of martial music, to the coordinating rhythms of work songs such as sea shanties, music

> serves to establish a particular shared affect throughout an entire group. Words are not necessary for this.[19]

Clark is also illuminating the power of nonverbal communication, which, according to communication theorists, accounts for 65 to 93 percent of all communicated meaning.[20] This is an important reminder to practitioners relying on only verbal communications, such as facts and figures, to transform public opinion. Music as a form of art offers practitioners a powerful nonverbal tool to communicate meaning.

Activists synthesizing music into marches, meetings, and workshops for the purpose of creating a safe, nonjudgmental space for dialogue and relationship building are advantaged by the biological benefits of music as well. Music is a helpful aid in the resurrection of embedded, socially conditioned rationalities. For instance, Clark explains that

> [t]his capacity for music fortuitously had another adaptive advantage, which is also correlated with group survival, namely its ability to stimulate associated memories. A piece of music, even one without any words at all, can sometimes recall vividly the time and place when it was heard before, especially if it was a highly significant occasion. We remember with great nostalgia the favorite lullaby our mother sang when we were small, or the stirring notes of *Pomp and Circumstance* when we marched at our high-school graduation. Like smells, music can remind us of people and places that matter to us. The music of one's own culture, of one's own generation, causes a welling up of memories often full of emotions. In this respect, music, even more than the language that came after it, has helped to preserve and transmit cultural knowledge over thousands of years.[21]

Music, with its emotional overtones and capacity to transport an adult into his or her toddler years at the simple playing of a lullaby, is an undeniably effective key into a person's emotional pathway. As philosopher Bruce Wilshire describes, "[Music] is momentous emotion—emotion as momentum—that can drive us through the shocks and disappointments, the black holes of time. It is universal therapy."[22]

Therapeutic artistry, however, is not solely constrained to musicianship because other art forms can also unlock emotional barriers. Advocates working in environments that are dominated by cognitive and competitive rationalities may benefit by experimenting to find which art form—movement arts, literary arts, dramatic arts, or visual arts—will resurrect the playful, less judgmental, intuitive self in a person who has wedged the emotional, arts-based rationalities deep into forgotten crevices.

Again, while there are numerous entry points for art activists to engage in emotional accessing, this section highlighted for art activists two possible entry points for emotional accessing: (1) the use of socially conditioned rationalities and institutionally specific conditioning to resurrect feelings of safety, creative freedom, and respect experienced in preschool and primary school and (2) the use of music's inherent expressiveness and adaptive functioning[23] to unlock emotional barriers.

Arts-based approaches, in sum, remain largely untapped and underutilized by most activists. While politically motivated art has existed in healthy fashion throughout the centuries, activists have not officially married into the artistic community and fashioned a working relationship beneficial to both fields. What remains clear, however, is that activists are starting to equip themselves with alternatives to the formal advocacy models, which were originally tailored for cognitively oriented audiences. Consequently, art activists can use the languages of art to access emotional pathways; this alternative, arts-based approach makes social stalemates no longer impenetrable.

III. Practicing Strategic Art Activism

Art activists working for social justice will generally select one of two strategic peacebuilding approaches, depending on the designated audience.[24] One strategic approach for art activists is to target powerful organizations or social orders; the second approach is to target powerless organizations or marginalized movements. The goal of the former is to

challenge and destabilize the powerful social order; the goal of the latter is to empower, unify, and stabilize the powerless, fledgling movement. Each art activist's objective, however, is similar: to balance what is imbalanced by making the powerful listen and giving voice to the powerless. This section will enumerate the strategies integral to these two approaches and provide examples of art activists working in the field challenging oppressive social orders and empowering marginalized movements.

Strategic peacebuilding, a term relatively new to the field of social justice and one worthy of adoption by art activists, embraces four distinct strategies:

› Waging Conflict Nonviolently: Practitioners intensify conflict, increasing a group's power to address issues and ripening the ground for transformation.

› Reducing Direct Violence: Practitioners aim to restrain perpetrators of violence and prevent/relieve the immediate suffering of victims of violence.

› Transforming Relationships: Practitioners use conflict transformation, restorative justice, and trauma healing to transform conflict and do justice.

› Building Capacity: Practitioners enhance capacity to meet needs/rights and prevent violence through education, training, research, and evaluation.[25]

Applying the four aforementioned strategies articulated by Lisa Schirch, peacebuilding professor at the Conflict Transformation Program,[26] art activism that challenges the powerful can be categorized under *waging conflict nonviolently*, with art activism that empowers and unifies the powerless more appropriately grouped under *building capacity*.

Art activists working for social change within unjust systems and structures can either (1) employ art to wage conflict nonviolently when

confronting powerful structures, systems, or organizations; or (2) utilize art to build capacity among the powerless and disenfranchised movements. These divergent approaches are equally essential to the social justice movement and neither one ranks higher in priority. Thorough analysis by art activists prior to intervention is helpful and highly recommended to determine which path is most appropriate.

This section will examine the legitimacy of these intervention methods and provide case studies to evaluate the efficacy of each approach. While art activism may not be appropriate for, or relevant in, all four stages of peacebuilding,[27] the author's intention with this section is to cite, from personal experience, the efficacy of art activism as a tool to wage conflict nonviolently and build community capacity.

A. Waging Conflict Nonviolently Through Art Activism

Waging conflict nonviolently traditionally includes tactics such as protests, direct action, and noncooperation. Social change agents frequently summon this strategy when confronting powerful, impervious, and unyielding systems or summoning conflict from latent or nascent stages.[28] Activists who are impatient with impervious and unyielding systems, disillusioned by the occasional ineffectiveness of alternative peacebuilding approaches, and frustrated by the seeming impotency of other routes may wage conflict as a last resort. Additionally, activists eager to summon conflict from hibernation may wage conflict nonviolently to intensify the conflict as a means of balancing the power by arousing the conflict from dormancy in the latent or nascent stage. Whatever the intention, art activists keen on balancing the power between the social justice movement and the social order will likely benefit by first analyzing the order's center of gravity to determine where to wage nonviolent conflict.

The center of gravity for many social orders lies within the symbolic reality promulgated by the communities that support the social order. All one has to do is remember the photographed image of the firefighters at

Ground Zero heroically raising a roughly-hewn flag pole, patriotically topped with a U.S. flag, from the ruins of the World Trade Center to understand the essential role of symbols and metaphors in the maintenance of the social order.[29] In art activism, it is not uncommon to reinterpret the symbolic objects of the social order; for example, one Canadian magazine's creation of a corporate U.S. flag featured corporate icons instead of the traditional stars[30] in an attempt to balance the power and wage conflict through coercive force. Agitation of this nature is not unintentional, because artists understand that "worlds change as the objects that compose them change in meaning."[31] Accordingly, an entry point to a previously immovable and impervious worldview[32] lies in the symbolized objects that support the symbolic worldview's steadfast composition. Equipped with this knowledge, the art activist continues to wage conflict by publicly reinterpreting symbolized objects and by challenging the assumptions and attachments projected onto the object by the social order.

Lest this agitation and reinterpretation of symbols be considered violent, the conflict must be followed by organized dialogue. When art activists reinterpret symbols of the social order during the waging of conflict, there must be simultaneous, strategic, and integrated follow-through, such as workshops, talkbacks, handouts, to allow space and time for resistance, reflection, and reinterpretation. Therefore, when waging nonviolent conflict, it would behoove art activists to ensure a space postshow or postexhibit that embraces resistance, values inquisitiveness, and encourages provocative analysis. If this process is neglected, then the artist remains an aggressive agitator and the audience is left in resistance mode.

Art activists interested in balancing power have not always stayed within the bounds of nonviolence. For example, they have hijacked sacred symbols to inflict harm to the social order's worldview as an act of revenge in response to the perceived harm inflicted on the powerless.[33] However, art activists who are intent on eschewing violence should think carefully about reinterpreting symbolized objects and be strategic in their use of

symbols to nonviolently intensify conflict from its latent phase. The social order may use violent means to suppress a dormant, camouflaged conflict because the intensification of a latent conflict has the potential to disrupt and upset the status quo. Succumbing to the social order's ethical standards, or lack thereof, will significantly undermine the moral foundation upon which the social justice movement stands. If social justice activists desire a nonviolent world, then nonviolent tools must be the only tools utilized.

Once the conflict is intensified and awakened from its dormant state, the ground is ripe for transformation. As exemplified in the case study below, art activists delicately sustain the intensification phase until power is balanced, awareness of issues increases, and relationships are developed to address the roots of the conflict.

Case Study: In April 2004, art activists at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, interested in changing the school's existing policy[34] on homosexual behavior, which applied to faculty or staff, intensified a latent conflict. The activists made an attempt to balance the power between the homosexual rights movement and EMU's administrative social order that reflects the social order of the Mennonite church.[35] Although the issue of homosexuality remained a controversial and heated topic in the Mennonite church, the recent firings of two homosexual professors at EMU had not moved the conflict into an intensified stage.[36] The conflict was avoided and neglected, yet ripe for a move from one stage to the next. An additional homosexual professor at EMU was approaching an impending firing,[37] or "contract non-renewal" as school administrators called it, and art activists sensed the timing was fortuitous.

Art activists chose a rainbow-colored flag, an object with symbolic importance to both the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) movement and the Mennonite social order, to display on EMU's main campus lawn. The symbolized object was not only the moniker of the GLBT movement, but also a sacred Christian symbol reflecting God's

promise to protect God's people as told in the Old Testament story of Noah and the flood.[38] The strategic use of the rainbow was intentional; it declared that people were unsafe and unprotected on EMU's campus.[39]

The reinterpretation of the symbolized object and the international media coverage garnered by the colossal display expeditiously moved the conflict out of latency. Previously, all debates and disputations pertinent to this issue were sequestered to working groups, committees, and departmental newsletters. The flag display, an impressive art exhibit,[40] was the tipping point that began to balance the scales of power.

Finally, after several years of latency, the emerging conflict garnered the full attention of the entire university and the local community. Not long after the media broke the story, EMU's president called for an open, all-campus meeting to publicly discuss the policy.[41] It was evident that the waging of nonviolent conflict was beginning to balance the power between the movement and the social order.

Art activists still working on the case are delicately finessing the balancing act of keeping the conflict intensified to prevent a return to latency or, conversely, an escalation into a dramatic denouement.[42] Movement organizers, while taking advantage of numerous media hits and opportunities for dialogue, are now carefully and deliberately marking their moves to ensure a positive progression toward the establishment of a power balance between the GLBT movement and the Mennonite social order.[43]

B. Building Capacity Through Art Activism

The main distinction between capacity-building art activists and nonviolent, conflict-waging art activists is, primarily, the style each group incorporates. Activists engaged in capacity building engineer activities that aim to build economically and socially just structures that support a sustainable culture of peace.[44] Activists engaged in waging nonviolent conflict construct activities to confront powerful, unjust structures[45] that threaten a sustainable culture of peace. Applied to an art activism

framework, prospective careers in these respective approaches might break down as follows: capacity-building art activists become facilitators, trainers, and educators, while the nonviolent, conflict-waging art activists become performance artists, marketing gurus, and direct action experts.

Art activists less interested in directly confronting the powerful social order and more interested in working to build bridges among marginalized or powerless communities and organizations will most likely opt for capacity-building work that subscribes to the following mission:

> Sustainability is a key principle of this category of peacebuilding. It implies long-term thinking and planning, creating constructive relationship patterns between people and their environment, and developing the human resources and abilities to meet human needs for many generations. Capacity building includes training and education programs, development, transformation, and conversion of military structures to focus on human security and research and evaluation.[46]

Although the "transformation and conversion of military structures" is not outside the parameters of an art activist's approach, the main characteristic guiding capacity-building art activists is the creation of communities that are fully capable of expressing conflict through democratic processes and that address the needs and rights of all people.

Robert Chaskin, a professor at the University of Chicago and known for his work in measuring the capacity of communities to promote social change and community development, offers helpful insights for activists engaged in building capacity. Chaskin suggests that there are four fundamental characteristics of healthy "community capacity": the existence of "(1) a sense of community, (2) a level of commitment among community members, (3) [an] ability to solve problems, and (4) access to resources."[47] Art activists subsequently wanting to build capacity may strategize on each of Chaskin's four points to make certain the art form is fostering a sense of community; renewing or inspiring commitment levels among members;

training members to problem solve; and increasing member access to resources through coalition building and education.

Federal arts funding, what little is left of it, is traditionally allotted to art activists actively integrating community capacity-building approaches. This is one reason why resident theater companies with a community education emphasis, art education programs, and music literacy projects survive fiscally. However, surviving as an art activist bent on capacity building is no small task and requires weeks or months of strategizing on the various ways to cultivate Chaskin's four fundamental characteristics of community capacity. The following case study illuminates one example of art activism where activists worked diligently to nurture the four fundamentals of community capacity in a marginalized and fractured community. This particular community had stumbled briefly upon an intense but fleeting power due to activists waging conflict nonviolently and was searching for sustainable growth, unification, and empowerment.

Case Study: In addition to highlighting the four fundamental characteristics of healthy community capacity, Chaskin's article points out key strategies to attain this, two of which are especially relevant in this case study: *community organizing* and the *fostering of collaborative relations among organizations*.[48] This case study illuminates how these strategies were strategically integrated into Barefoot Theatre Group (BTG)[49] productions after the World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial conference visited Seattle, Washington, in the fall of 1999.

Activists largely touted the WTO protests as successful, elucidating that the ministerial meetings were inconclusive, member votes were not unanimous, and small independent countries vocalized their discontent despite the bullying of larger countries.[50] However, the aftermath of the protests left a city shocked and bewildered, a police department in defense of the previously instated martial law, a media conglomerate charged with misrepresenting the activists, and rights-based organizations with no forum to continue coalescing on community-building initiatives.

Inspired by a desire to fill the forum void, strengthen communities victimized by police brutality, and embolden independent media stations, BTG secured the rights to produce Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*,[51] a controversial satire that addresses police brutality, workers' rights issues, and bias in the media.[52] However, this production would not be an ordinary theater production where audience members come, are passively entertained, and then leave. Through *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, BTG hoped to galvanize the movement, empower spectators into action, and provide a forum for the gathering of civil rights lawyers, environmentalists, union representatives, and independent journalists.[53]

Chaskin's strategies—community organizing and fostering of collaborative relations among organizations[54]—were of paramount importance for BTG. With Fo's play, the theater company wanted to facilitate an event that featured not only the performance but also Seattle-based organizations working for social and environmental justice and Seattle-based art activists organizing within the community. BTG's purpose was 50 percent artistry and 50 percent activism; thus, it was crucial to give the audience entertainment *and* opportunity.

Funding granted by the King County Labor Council and Local 17 confirmed that the production was on the right path. Furthermore, alliances with the Independent Media Center, National Lawyers Guild, Community Action Network, and Mothers for Police Accountability reassured the company that a forum was desired and in demand. Heeding Chaskin's advice on the fostering of collaborative relations made it that much easier to accomplish the BTG mission: to educate, empower, and engage audience members in the reclaiming of an authentic democracy.[55]

For art activists working to build community capacity, preshow and postshow activities are as necessary as the show itself. Interacting with the audience on a variety of levels, from entertainment to education, increases the chances that spectators will become more engaged in a specific issue. BTG utilized the postshow period to feature representatives from each

allied organization to facilitate audience dialogue vis-à-vis relevant, critical issues facing the Seattle community. These representatives shared tangible ways to get involved. Art exhibits and action-oriented tables surrounded the performance space, encouraging spectators to be educated and engaged on these issues.[56]

It was evident that the community needed a post-WTO forum to unify and organize, and the production's run was even extended to try to meet this demand. Safe yet entertaining, the theatrical forum was an opportunity to emotionally unify, increase coalition building, and begin a strategy to revitalize the momentum formed during the WTO protests.

This case study, and the one before it, highlight the roles capacity-building art activists *and* nonviolent, conflict-waging art activists can and should play in the peacebuilding movement. Notwithstanding the fact that the work to be done is vast and the practitioners are few, art activism is finally emerging as a legitimate player in the peacebuilding field,[57] and art activists are prepared and willing to incorporate this viable strategic approach.

IV. ART ACTIVISM SPOTLIGHT: THEATER-BASED CONFLICT RESOLUTION

This section spotlights one practical, concrete practice of art activism that is transforming the ways in which communities approach social conflicts resulting from socially unjust systems and structures. Augmenting the previous section's focus on art activists that nonviolently wage conflict and build community capacity to prevent conflict, this section outlines ways for theater-based art activists to actively resolve conflict.

Art activists are revolutionizing conflict-resolution methodologies and have introduced theater as a key player in the development of this field.[58] Theater-based conflict-resolution offers activists a powerful, pioneering, and culturally malleable alternative to the existing conflict-resolution models. This section explicates the feasibility of theater-based conflict-

resolution in diverse cultural contexts and the associated techniques involved.

In the peacebuilding field there is some conflict, ironically enough, over whether conflict should be approached *rationally*, separating the person from the problem, or *relationally*, an approach that understands the interconnectedness and inseparability of people and their problems.[59] Opposing opinions exist between low-context cultures (e.g., urban, contemporary U.S. culture) and high-context cultures (e.g., traditional Japanese society) on appropriate methods of peacebuilding. These divergent opinions place a strain on communication between aforesaid cultural types and, concomitantly, inhibit a peacebuilder's efficacy[60] in transcontinental conflict-resolution work.

Low-context cultures, with a low level of influential factors guiding behavior, generally prefer to cleanly separate the conflict issue from the person. High-context cultures, with a higher level of influential factors guiding behavior, view the problem issue and the problem person as interrelated.[61] A third option that remains relatively unexplored but potentially carries with it a technique satisfactory to both cultures is the theatrical forum. Interactive role-playing and storytelling methods have the capacity to integrate low-context's proclivity for conflict objectivity with high-context's fondness for an interconnected, informal, and community-based approach.

A. Low-Context Approaches to Conflict

An illustration of low-context culture's approach to conflict is set forth as follows: "In a low-context culture— such as the United States—a conflict is more likely to be seen as a one-to-one difference. The opponents will seek to fractionate the conflict into the smallest possible slice of interaction."[62] Moreover, members of low-context cultures prefer handling conflicts directly and view the indirect way as a weak, cowardly, or evasive act.[63]

In response to these low-context leanings, Roger Fisher and William Ury, authors of *Getting to Yes* and representatives of a low-context culture, propose that the critical first step in any negotiation process is to separate the people from the problem.[64] A colloquial example that refers to low-context's emphasis on separating the people from the problem is the frequently used phrase: "hate the sin and not the sinner." Fisher and Ury further warn that "[t]he relationship tends to become entangled with the problem. A major consequence of the 'people problem' is that the parties' relationship tends to become entangled with their discussions of substance."[65] The authors' philosophy implies that people and problems can and should be cleanly divided, which is a problematic paradigm when working with high-context cultures that believe in the inseparability of these entities.

Theater-based conflict resolution does not judge or evaluate the low-context approach and allows art activists to value and respect the low-context culture's credence in conflict-resolution processes that are methodically compartmentalized and directly confronted. Rather, the theatrical forum intends to serve as a conciliatory mediator that embraces and satiates the needs and interests of low-context *and* high-context cultures in conflict.

Applied to a low-context conflict situation, theater satisfies needs for directness and objectivity by staging fictionalized stories for quarreling communities that anonymously illuminate the specific community conflict. Using anonymity in theatrical storytelling, such as fictionalizing the story by rewriting it with surrogate names and locations, is critical to this process because it allows the problem to be isolated from the person. Community representatives, including both stakeholders in the real conflict and spectators of the staged conflict, are then afforded the opportunity to assess the problem objectively, witness theatrically staged options for resolving the conflict, and implement these proposed conciliatory processes into the real conflict.

B. High-Context Approaches to Conflict

High-context cultures place a higher value on face-saving techniques that avoid confrontational approaches and clinical separations of people and their problems.[66] High-context cultures "view the direct way of handling conflict as lacking in politeness, or good taste."[67] It is highly uncharacteristic of traditional cultures to address the problem or the person directly, making it even more difficult to isolate the problem from the person. The traditional Chinese model of conflict resolution, as an example of a high-context culture, is cited below and leaves little room for the *Getting to Yes* authors' proposition of an easy-to-implement procedure whereby the problem is extracted from the person. The Chinese model is "based on saving face for both parties in dispute"[68] and this model is further explicated as follows:

> To be careful about not hurting someone's face is not simply a matter of being kind or considerate; it functions to avoid conflict, or, more precisely, to avoid confrontation or bringing conflict out into the open. This conflict avoidance is a basic orientation in Chinese social processes rooted in the Confucian model of society based on the maintenance of harmony in interpersonal relations.[69]

These face-saving approaches, inherent in high-context cultures, prevent the two parties in conflict from ever confronting each other openly or directly.

Applied to a high-context conflict situation, theater gratifies the need for indirectness and interconnectedness by acting as a third-party mediator via the stage. Adapting the high-context conflict for the stage requires a fictionalization process: name changing, location alteration, and situation modification. These adaptations ensure indirectness and guarantee ease of access for audience members accustomed to circuitous conflict-resolution processes. Ideally, the actors originate from within the community, enabling an interrelated approach to conflict resolution. Empowering internal community actors to address internal conflicts helps maintain

community cohesiveness and encourages long-term ownership and management of conflict.

Synthesizing low-context and high-context conflict-resolution processes reveals theater's ability to simultaneously satisfy contrasting cultural needs from low-context and high-context paradigms. Theater gives the low-context community the opportunity to view and gain perspective on their own conflict objectively through the recreation and reenactment of the anonymously isolated, internal conflict. Concurrently, theater allows the high-context community to save face by witnessing someone else's story—which is, in fact, their own—performed by a concerned cast of recognizable, local actors. Most importantly, interactive theater challenges the multicultural, multicontext audience to resolve conflict collectively and constructively.

C. Sample Outline of Theater-Based Conflict Resolution

Art activists interested in ensuring cultural context ambidextrousness should consider creating theater-based conflict-resolution processes that are sensitive and relevant to high-context *and* low-context cultures. Theater forums that embrace both context-specific approaches maximize efficiency in human resources, time, and money, and they afford both contexts an opportunity to resolve conflict in their preferred cultural style. This section outlines the steps art activists can take to ensure cultural relevancy when establishing forums for theater-based conflict resolution.

The first question the art activist must consider is this: *Who* will intervene? The communities may, or may not, seek outside intervention, and how this question is answered will significantly shape the subsequent process. Ideally, a multicultural, multicontextual theater company already exists or could be quickly fashioned. It is likely that high-context cultures will be more receptive to a local cast comprised of familiar faces. Low-context cultures, on the other hand, while amenable to local casting, may prefer the addition of external, professional representatives. Thus, the

theater company should be an amalgamation of low-context and high-context actors with the addition, when possible, of an outside theater expert.

The theater company's first objective is to build a foundation of trust upon which to act. If the company is comprised of locals, then trust may already exist. If such foundational trust already exists, the company can begin interviewing community members and soliciting stories that illuminate an unresolved conflict. After interviewing each stakeholder in the low-context and high-context communities, the theater company embarks upon a rigorous rehearsal process that is time sensitive[70] and creates a fictionalized script that loosely parallels the real conflict. Once the production is ready, the theater company invites willing stakeholders to the performance. This is an informal process that can take place in a plaza, religious structure, theater, house, or conference room. After one round of presentation with the conflict remaining unresolved, the theater company invites the audience to actively intervene in the second round of presentation and propose viable solutions to the conflict. Observers interested in transforming the conflict are encouraged to interrupt the play's action, replace the oppressed actor, and continue the play's action while simultaneously integrating potential solutions to the conflict.

The rounds of presentation continue until a broad spectrum of innovative alternatives is tested. The theater company's approach is face-saving yet direct. It provides objectivity by isolating the problem from the real people involved through an informal presentation put on by familiar faces within a supportive community atmosphere.[71]

D. Additional Benefits of Theater-Based Conflict Resolution

In a world accustomed to attention-grabbing presentational styles, theater offers practitioners a provocative process equally competitive in entertainment value. It appears that even William Shakespeare, inadvertently or intentionally, recognized the value of creative, theatrical approaches to raising consciousness. Hamlet, one of Shakespeare's most

perceptive characters, rigs a reenactment to reveal another character's culpability in a particular conflict saying, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King."[72] Organic and transportable, theater-based conflict-resolution processes can be staged in almost any setting. Such mobility is helpful when stakeholders are reluctant to be seen in public and prefer an intimate atmosphere for dialoguing. Interactive theater that engages audience participation also teaches stakeholders to be better communicators, which is a valuable tool for preventing future conflicts.

It is in this relaxed theatrical forum where both low-context and high-context communities are empowered to proactively take ownership of the conflict by safely utilizing their respective techniques. It is in this forum where interactive theater, as a multicultural facilitator, has enough flexibility to embrace the polemic preferences for rational/relational, formal/informal, or objective/subjective conflict-resolution processes. It is in this forum where theater has the capacity to integrate low-context's proclivity for conflict objectivity with high-context's fondness of an interconnected, informal approach.

Inherently elicitive, theater-based conflict-resolution processes are pioneering a dynamic and dramatic dialectic that allows for ample flexibility in attitude, approach, and application. Harkening the birth of a new conflict-resolution methodology, interactive theater is establishing a dialogical forum that is more culturally appropriate and sensitive to low-context and high-context conflict-resolution styles.

V. CONCLUSION

Engaging in the social justice movement is no easy task. Everyday I meet veteran activists on the verge of a complete surrender to cynicism and apathy due to the overwhelming obstacles facing social justice advocates. Activists frequently feel that they have exhausted the tools in their toolbox and that no alternative strategies exist. Most likely, these activists have exercised a range of cognitive approaches that include indisputable facts

and figures, buttressed by convincing arguments, delivered passionately and eloquently. Baffling though it may seem, this cognitive approach often fails to impregnate a person's emotional pathway or worldview—a perspective deeply influenced by and entrenched in religion, culture, tradition, and identity.

Consequently, when a social justice activist candidly illuminates the realities of a deteriorating domestic infrastructure, it may never land on the shores of an entrenched worldview. What is essential when attempting to transform consciousness is not only to rely on impressive facts and figures and commanding speech, but also to work within the worldview of one's target constituency—a metaphysical reality shaped by emotion, intuition, and symbolism.

The transformation of entrenched worldviews is a process that requires immense emotional intelligence, symbolic dexterity, and cultural sensitivity. It is a paradigmatic evolution procured by means of traditional, fact-based activism and spurred by strategic art activism as well. Serving as a critical catalyst in the transformative process, art activism fills a niche in the social justice movement as the emotional change agent truly capable of "winning the hearts and minds" of the target constituency.[73] The clever coiner of the aforementioned quip was undoubtedly deliberate in the sequencing of hearts and minds; the poet knew that the winning approach must first be emotional, then cognitive. Let us as social justice advocates, peacebuilding practitioners, and art activists wisely follow suit in our noble pursuit of justice and sustainable peace.

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[1] Michael Shank is Director of Public Affairs for World Culture Open, an international NGO promoting the role of arts and culture as an alternative vehicle for diplomacy in

international peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts. He is also the founder and director of the International Forum on Communication and Culture.

[2] From doomsday activists to research-based policy analysts, the social justice movement seems to rely on bits of knowledge, facts, and figures—whether legitimate or falsified—to convince and convert the masses (e.g., a litany of facts that identifies the starving or malnourished populations in Africa; the islands in South Asia to be submerged by water in 2060 due to global warming; the number of American citizens without health insurance or sufficient education; the lengthy list of endangered or extinct species; or the amount of Iraqi civilians killed by sanctions or U.S. military intervention).

[3] Arguably, *art* is everywhere and in every aspect of human existence. While delineating art may limit theoretical applications, for this article the author decided to define art to include the following: movement arts, dramatic arts, visual arts, and literary arts.

[4] *See* Mike Allen, *Kerry vs. The Format, Bush vs. His Temper*, WASH. POST, Oct. 1, 2004, at A8.

[5] *See* John Farrell, *Kerry Uses Debates' Stage to Turn Campaign Around*, DENVER POST, Oct. 14, 2004, at A1.

[6] *See* Lois Romano, *Democrat Hunts for Votes—and Prey*, WASH. POST, Oct. 22, 2004, at A6.

[7] *See* Tom R. Burns, *Two Conceptions of Human Agency: Rational Choice Theory and the Social Theory of Action*, *in* AGENCY AND STRUCTURE: REORIENTING SOCIAL THEORY 197–249 (Piotr Sztompka ed., 1994).

[8] *See id.* at 199–200, 227; *see also* Mark Granovetter, *Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness*, 91 AM. J. SOC. 481 (1985).

[9] *See* Burns, *supra* note 7, at 210.

[10] *Id*. at 200.

[11] *See* David Hursh & Camille Anne Martina, *Neoliberalism and Schooling in the U.S.: How State and Federal Government Education Policies Perpetuate Inequality*, J. CRITICAL EDUC. POL'Y STUD., Oct. 2003, *at* http://jceps.com/?pageID=article&articleID=12 (last visited Apr. 15, 2005).

[12] *See* Burns, *supra* note 7, at 227.

[13] Exceptions must be made for students with competitive teachers or parents that naïvely attempt to assign a grade to an artistic scribbling, a creative movement piece, or a one-sentence poem.

[14] *See* HOWARD GARDNER, ART, MIND AND BRAIN: A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO CREATIVITY 103–09 (1982).

[15] MARY E. CLARK, IN SEARCH OF HUMAN NATURE 197 (2002).

[16] *See* Burns, *supra* note 7, at 227.

[17] ALISON GOPNIK ET AL., THE SCIENTIST IN THE CRIB: MINDS, BRAINS, AND HOW CHILDREN LEARN 186 (1999).

[18] CLARK, *supra* note 15, at 195.

[19] *Id*. at 171.

[20] JULIA WOOD, SPINNING THE SYMBOLIC WEB: HUMAN COMMUNICATION AS SYMBOLIC INTERACTION 86 (1992).

[21] CLARK, *supra* note 15, at 172.

[22] Bruce Wilshire, *The Body, Music, and Healing*, *in* HANDBOOK OF PHENOMENOLOGY AND MEDICINE 222–23 (S. Kay Toombs ed., 2001).
[23] *See* CLARK, *supra* note 15, at 171–72.
[24] This conclusion is based on the author's personal experiences.
[25] *See* LISA SCHIRCH, THE LITTLE BOOK OF STRATEGIC PEACEBUILDING 25–26 (2004).
[26] The Conflict Transformation Program (soon to be renamed the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding) is based at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. For more information about this program, see Eastern Mennonite University, Conflict Transformation Program–CPT Overview, *at* http://www.emu.edu/ctp/ctp.html (last visited Mar. 16, 2004).
[27] Art activism's relevance within the field of *transforming relationships* is poignantly visible in the fields of art therapy, dance therapy, music therapy, and drama therapy, where art is systematically integrated by trained and licensed practitioners to heal pain and trauma. Where art activism is less frequently integrated is in the field of *reducing violence*, a field that is more appropriately staffed with peacekeepers and emergency relief personnel.
[28] The case study below references this strategy in practical terms. From a theoretical perspective, David Bromley articulates the intensification of conflict in four distinct stages: latent, nascent, intensified, and dramatic denouement. *See* CULTS, RELIGION, AND VIOLENCE 11–41 (David G. Bromley & J. Gordon Melton eds., 2002).
[29] Rick Hampson, *The Photo No One Will Forget*, USA TODAY, Dec. 27, 2001, at 1A.
[30] Adbusters Magazine, Corporate U.S. Flag, *at* https://secure.adbusters.org/orders/flag/ (last visited Feb. 24, 2005).
[31] HERBERT BLUMER, SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM: PERSPECTIVE AND METHOD 69 (1969).
[32] *Worldview* refers to a person's symbolic perspective, i.e. a reality that is shaped and constructed by religion, culture, ethics, values, and mores.
[33] *See*, *e.g.*, John Carmody, *Singer Stuns 'SNL' Viewers; Sinead O'Connor Tears Up Pope Photo*, WASH. POST, Oct. 5, 1992, at C1.
[34] *See* Eastern Mennonite University Student Handbook, Community Lifestyle Commitment Section, *at* http://www.emu.edu/studentlife/studenthandbook/clc.html (last visited Feb. 24, 2005).
[35] *See* Katherine Phan, *EMU President Stands Firm to Church's Stance During Forum*, CHRISTIAN POST, Apr. 17, 2004.
[36] *See* Ted Olsen, *Christian University Under Fire for Firing Gay Professors*, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, Apr. 16, 2004, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/115/51.0.html (last visited Mar. 16, 2005).
[37] *See* Cory Anderson, *Hildebrand's Teaching Contract Not Renewed: Swartzendruber, Morris Respond to Questions Raised About Decision*, WEATHER VANE–ONLINE, Apr. 15, 2004, *at* http://weathervane.emu.edu/index/50/24/news/hildebrand (last visited Mar. 16, 2005).
[38] *Genesis* 9:8–17 (New International).
[39] *See* SCHIRCH, *supra* note 25, at 104–05.

[40] *See* Jeff Mellott, *EMU Sets Forum to Address* [sic] *Discrimination Charges*, DAILY NEWS-RECORD, Apr. 12, 2004, *at* http://www.dnronline.com/archives2004/4-12-04/story3.asp (last visited Mar. 16, 2005).
[41] *See* Jeff Mellott, *EMU President Addresses Concerns Over Homosexual Firings*, DAILY NEWS-RECORD, Apr. 14, 2004, *at* http://www.dnronline.com/archives2004/4-14-04/story2.asp (last visited Mar. 16, 2005).
[42] *See* Jim Brown, *Mennonite School Defends Policy After Firing Homosexual Professor*, AM. FAM. ASS'N–ONLINE, Apr. 19, 2004, *at* http://headlines.agapepress.org/archive/4/afa/192004d.asp (last visited Mar. 16, 2005); *EMU Students Protest 2 Gay Faculty Firings*, LANCASTER NEW ERA (Lancaster, PA), at B6.
[43] Tim Saunders, *EMU Campus Takes on Homosexuality*, WHSV CHANNEL 3 TV, *at* http://www.whsv.com/news/headlines/681442.html (last visited Mar. 16, 2004).
[44] *See* SCHIRCH, *supra* note 25, at 26.
[45] *See id*. at 29.
[46] *Id.* at 56–57.
[47] Robert J. Chaskin, *Building Community Capacity: A Definitional Framework and Case Studies from a Comprehensive Community Initiative*, 36 URB. AFF. REV. 291, 295–96 (2001).
[48] *See id*. at 306–10.
[49] The author co-founded the Seattle-based Barefoot Theatre Group in 1999 and served as the artistic director for the theater company for two years. To learn more about the theater group, visit http://www.geocities.com/barefoottheatregroup/ (last visited Mar. 15, 2005).
[50] *See* Michael Paulson & Robert McClure, *WTO Summit Ends in Failure*, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Dec. 4, 1999, at A1.
[51] *See BIO: Theater–Michael Shank*, THE STRANGER, Mar. 15–21, 2001, *at* http://thestranger.com/2001-03-15/bio-theater.html (last visited Mar. 16, 2005).
[52] For a synopsis of Dario Fo's satire, visit http://ocw.mit.edu/NR/rdonlyres/Foreign-Languages-and-Literatures/21F-061Spring2004/09D0E1FF-09BE-418A-9791-B2973668C42D/0/fo.pdf (last visited Mar. 17, 2005).
[53] *See supra* note 49.
[54] Chaskin, *supra* note 47, at 306–10.
[55] *See* Barefoot Theatre Group–Mission Statement, *at* http://www.geocities.com/barefoottheatregroup/grassroots.html (last visited Mar. 17, 2005).
[56] *See* King County Labor Council, Labor's Voice–Spring 2001, *at* http://www.kclc.org/spring_2001.htm (last visited Mar. 17, 2005).
[57] *See* Marianne Klink & Donna Crawford, *Conflict Resolution and the Arts–OJJDP Fact Sheet #80*, U.S. Dept. of Justice–Office of Justice Programs (June 1998), *available at* http://www.ncjrs.org/pdffiles1/fs9880.pdf (last visited Mar. 17, 2005).
[58] Numerous authors have merged the fields of theater and conflict resolution. For example, see PATRICIA STERNBERG, THEATRE FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION (1998); AUGUSTO BOAL, RAINBOW OF DESIRE (1995); AUGUSTO BOAL, GAMES FOR ACTORS

AND NON-ACTORS (2d ed. 2002) (regarding forum theatre techniques); MICHAEL ROHD, THEATRE FOR COMMUNITY, CONFLICT AND DIALOGUE (1998); SCHIRCH, *supra* note 25.

[59] *See* DAVID W. AUGSBURGER, CONFLICT MEDIATION ACROSS CULTURES 206–07 (1992).

[60] *See generally* JOHN PAUL LEDERACH, PREPARING FOR PEACE: CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION ACROSS CULTURES (1995) (detailing the necessary culturally appropriate techniques for effective transcontinental conflict resolution).

[61] AUGSBURGER, *supra* note 59, at 91.

[62] *Id*. at 28–29.

[63] *Id*. at 91.

[64] *See* ROGER FISHER & WILLIAM URY, GETTING TO YES 17–39 (2d ed. 1991).

[65] *Id.* at 20.

[66] *See* AUGSBURGER, *supra* note 59, at 92–93.

[67] *Id*. at 91.

[68] *Id*. at 95.

[69] *Id.*.

[70] The production is time sensitive in the fact that it addresses a relevant and current conflict that requires immediate attention, lest the conflict rage on uninterrupted.

[71] Theater practitioner, Augusto Boal, describes this conflict analysis and resolution process as Forum Theatre. *See* RAINBOW OF DESIRE, *supra* note 58, at 184.

[72] WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE TRAGEDY OF HAMLET, act 2, sc. 2 (Harold Jenkins ed., Thomson 2002) (1600).

[73] The phrase, 'winning the hearts and minds' has its roots in the Vietnam War, where the phrase was first used as part of the battle to convince the American public that the U.S. invasion and occupation of Vietnam was part of a wider war against the Communist 'plot' to take over the world.