

# Can the Arts Change the World?

**The Transformative Power of the Arts in Fostering and Sustaining Social  
Change: A Leadership for a Changing World Cooperative Inquiry**

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## About this project

In 2004–2005, eight community-arts leaders from the Leadership for a Changing World (LCW) program and two facilitators took part in a **cooperative inquiry** process, which brought them together to create and discuss a self-devised question: “How and when does art release, create, and sustain transforming power for social change?”

Cooperative inquiry (CI) is a participatory research technique in which a small group of participants use their own experience to generate insights around an issue that is of burning concern to all of them. In this type of inquiry, participants formulate a question, agree upon a course of action, individually engage in action through their work, and then collectively make meaning from the data generated by their actions. This cycle of reflection-action-reflection is repeated several times until the group feels it has successfully addressed its concerns. On occasion, facilitators support the group to ensure that its members use the process to its full advantage. CI contributes to creating new knowledge grounded in practice, deepens the participants’ leadership potential, and strengthens relationships among group members.

This booklet documents the learning and lessons that the group accomplished throughout its inquiry process. CI is one of several research activities offered by the Research and Documentation component of the LCW program, housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA). LCW uses three parallel research methodologies—cooperative inquiry, narrative inquiry, and ethnography—to explore questions related to the work of social change leadership and to understand how this kind of leadership is forged and sustained. The program is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses collective inquiry and dialogue with LCW participants as the core of the research process. (For a further description of LCW and RCLA, please see the inside back cover.)

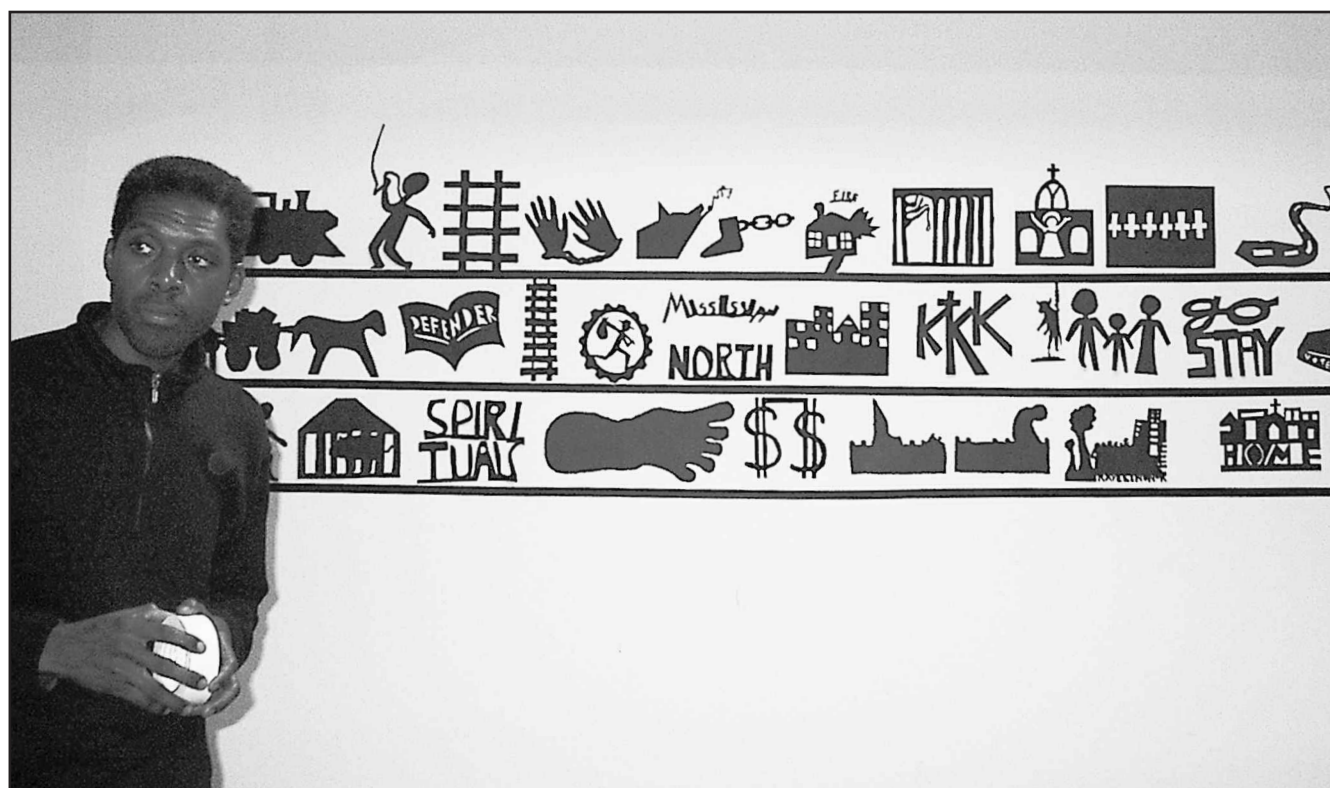
The cooperative inquiry group included social change leaders who were either LCW award recipients or members of the LCW awardee organizations, and two experienced facilitators. Participants included: Arnold Aprill of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE); Elise Holliday of Abused Deaf Women’s Advocacy Services (ADWAS); Fahari Jeffers of the Domestic Workers United Home Care Center; Nobuko Miyamoto of Great Leap; Abby Scher of the immigrant press in New York; Diana Spatz of Low-Income Families’ Empowerment Through Education (LIFETIME); Richard Townsell of the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation; Lily Yeh of the Village of Arts and Humanities; as well as Lyle Yorks and Sandra Hayes (Facilitators) from Columbia University Teachers College. (For further information about the participants, see page 22.)

To answer their question, participants discussed their own work and made site visits to one another’s organizations: visiting Philadelphia to see the Village of Arts and Humanities; Chicago to witness the collaborations created by Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education; Los Angeles to watch the fruits of Great Leap’s year-long workshop creating a community performance of people’s migration stories; and Seattle to visit Abused Deaf Women’s Advocacy Services and a community-created Asian American museum. They also worked further on answering the question at three additional meetings. The group charged Abby Scher with the task of writing the final report.

RCLA is proud to present this work to the LCW community and to similar organizations and leaders. We hope this inspires others interested in using the power of the arts in the work of social justice.

### Acknowledgements

The members of this CI group and the LCW Research and Documentation team at the Research Center for Leadership in Action would like to acknowledge the many contributions of co-researchers, partners, and other social change leaders in LCW who have been active participants in shaping our learning. We want to particularly thank the Ford Foundation for its generous support of the LCW program and the Research and Documentation effort.



*Arnie's friend Bernard Williams created a cutout paper exercise that blends together people's visions. Richard invited Arnie to conduct this exercise during a planning meeting on the West Side of Chicago to help residents map out their hopes and visions for the future. Photo: Arnold Aprill*

## Contents

<i>The Transformative Power of Community Arts</i> .....	4
<i>Community Arts in Action</i> .....	8
<i>Chicago: Shaping Visions</i> .....	9
<i>Philadelphia: Claiming the Right to Beauty</i> .....	11
<i>Los Angeles: Making Great Leaps Forward</i> .....	13
<i>Oakland: Taking On the Media</i> .....	15
<i>Seattle: Exhibiting for Social Justice</i> .....	17
<i>Learning from Our Experiences</i> .....	20

# The Transformative Power of Community Arts

*“The arts open boundaries among cultures, but also among disciplines, generations, and faiths.”*

—Nobuko Miyamoto

Can the arts change the world? In an America torn by distrust, poverty, wars abroad, and laws that ever more support the power of corporations over people, the arts may seem beside the point. Yet we, a group of community-arts activists and others who organize locally to take on the lot of the disenfranchised, have turned aside cynicism and answered, “Yes, the arts can change the world.”

Through site visits and discussions during six face-to-face meetings, we saw the arts transform small worlds in Chicago, Philadelphia, Seattle, Los Angeles, Brooklyn, and Oakland, places where we organize.

Community arts—in which artists collaborate with the wider community—turned the tide on Chicago’s West Side so that policy experts from outside the community could no longer take charge in local neighborhoods and tell residents what was good for them.

Through the arts, a community transformed degraded and abandoned streets and buildings in north Philadelphia into a web of sculpture gardens and art parks, making the statement, “We are important, even though we are poor.”

A sanctuary for deaf, abused women in Seattle used the beauty of its facility to offer hope by showing clients that they deserved beauty as much as everyone else did.

In California welfare moms and their kids painted T-shirts to let Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger know they didn’t like his plan to cut cost-of-living allowances, child care, and other benefits. They won statewide media attention that actually helped prevent some of the cuts.

In Los Angeles, Mexican Americans, Japanese immigrants, Muslims, and others built intercultural understanding by creating a community performance based on their families’ migration stories. They learned that their own stories were a starting point from which they could begin to hear the stories of others. And they learned that sharing their stories in a group performance wove a new cultural quilt that enlarged the boundaries of their communities.

## How the Arts Transform

***“Beauty is a right,” said Lily Yeh, the painter who led the transformation of north Philadelphia through the Village of Arts and Humanities.***

At the beginning of our inquiry into the role of arts in social change, some of us would have resisted her statement as outlandish. We were like “most organizer types who don’t want to sit down and draw or otherwise visually display their own experience,” said Richard Townsell, director of a community development organization in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago’s West Side. Such types are often skeptical of the idea of introducing the arts into organizing, not least because they see the arts as an elite enterprise.

By the end of our inquiry, however, we had come to accept Lily’s “outlandish” pronouncement—that everyone has a right to beauty in his or her community—as a neat summary of what we all now believe to be true.

All organizing is a creative act. The more we discussed bringing creative expression into our work, the more we saw what community organizers had in common with community artists. We worked in different parts of the country, with different sorts of people, and in different ways. Yet we all felt that we were stitching together communities fragmented by distrust, economic trials, ethnocentrism, and the silencing of their own knowledge by the overwhelming power of the media and what used to be called “the system.”

Whether it was Diana working with parents on welfare who were struggling to go to college; Richard working with community leaders in North Lawndale, where the median annual income is \$18,000; or Arnie ensuring that public school children could find a voice through the arts in a school system that wasn’t interested in that type of education, we were fashioning a new reality through what we created together. As the Highlander Center’s great leader Myles Horton famously said, “We make the road by walking.”

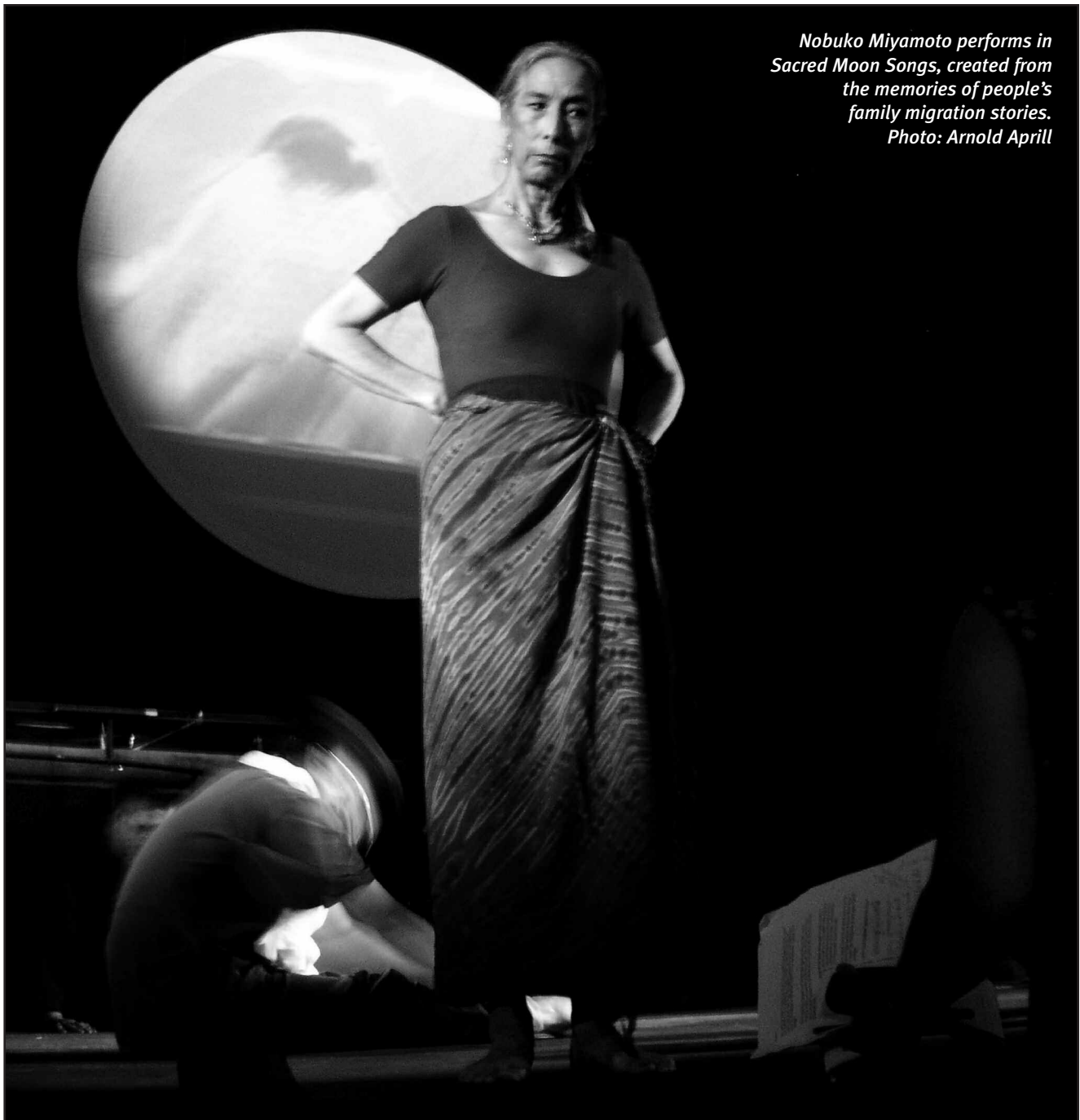
The eight of us were part of a “cooperative inquiry” process sponsored by Leadership for a Changing World that as far as we could tell had put us all together to first pose a question and then discuss and answer it in a series of encounters based on our own observation, analysis, and experiences. The question we created was: “How and when does art release, create, and sustain transforming power for social change?”

“The value of this group is that we are not [all] artists,” said Nobuko, one of the artists among us. The artists saw their work through the eyes of organizers, and the organizers saw the transformative power of the community artists. Before describing our site visits below, here, in summary, is what we learned:

**Community arts can create a safe space that allows us to trust and be open to change.** We saw this in Los Angeles and Brooklyn, where Nobuko Miyamoto, a dancer and performer, brought together people from many different backgrounds—Muslims, Buddhists, Arab Americans, Jewish Americans, Chicanos, Dominicans, Japanese, and

### **Personal Transformation: Abby Scher**

The struggle for me was not only to analyze and think through other people’s experience, but to bring in my own insights from working with the independent media. Journalists (and sociologists) often objectify people and society, even alternative journalists. Meanwhile much of our research discussion was about how the arts can help make people reflective and open to change. It took many meetings before I began sharing my insights about how independent media-makers help create new thinking, even if it is not part of the “arts.” I also left the group more determined to pay attention to the visual and to beauty in my editorial work.



*Nobuko Miyamoto performs in  
Sacred Moon Songs, created from  
the memories of people's  
family migration stories.  
Photo: Arnold Aprill*

Japanese Americans. By moving together and telling stories, they built trust and common ground. Through an arts exercise conducted with Arnie, Richard created another safe space in North Lawndale that allowed older leaders to pass on their knowledge to the younger folks and confidently allow them to take the lead.

**Through the arts, we create something new.** In the arts, we are each, in our own way, engaged in a battle against homogenization, struggling to build a new sense of ourselves, a sense of possibility, and a way of seeing outside of the ordinary. We start new conversations that cross beyond the boundaries of the commonplace and leave behind the platitudes created by the interests of the powerful. We are no longer consumers of culture, but rather its creators.



**Art can serve as a speed bump, slowing us down to reflect.** The process of creation—including writing and telling our stories—can help us slow down and reflect together, rather than talk past each other. Organizers sometimes jump ahead with their agendas before witnessing what is happening in a community. By slowing down, we unearth what is waiting to be spoken and clarify our core vision and purpose. This can help us hold to our true mission, whatever that might be.

**Surrounding ourselves with beauty communicates that we are important and mean something in the world, while offering a vision of what we are working for.** Lily brought her idea of ‘beauty is a right’ to north Philly, just as Abused Deaf Women’s Advocacy Services (ADWAS) instinctively did when decorating its Seattle office for abused deaf women. Instead of communicating, “This is a worthless neighborhood,” Lily’s art parks communicated, “This is a place of meditation, beauty, and joy.”

Diana echoed Lily but was a bit more pithy: “You think you don’t deserve as much because you have a crummy school in a crummy neighborhood. You feel more worthy when you are surrounded by beauty.”

**Art can honor our past by creating a record of what we have done, thus anchoring us for our move into the future.** By reestablishing context, whether by naming our history, telling our stories, or making the community visible, we ground ourselves against the emptiness that mainstream culture offers to us. This is part of slowing down, which allows us to distance ourselves from what is going on so that we can make new things visible, and re-contextualize and analyze them. Abby made the connection between community arts and the independent media: both create context, often by making the historical roots of a community visible.

**The process of creating together can heal and sustain us for the long haul.** We realized that in this difficult political moment, we needed to sustain our work by creating a healing culture within our organizations and movements that is compassionate to ourselves and others. Activists need some healing right now, and some of that may be done through the arts.

We saw this especially in Nobuko’s work. In Brooklyn, she and Abby brought together women leaders—Ecuadorian, Dominican, Caribbean, Arab, Jewish, and Japanese—into a healing space. By having the women tell their stories (sometimes by acting them out in movement) and listen to each other with respect, she helped the hard-working organizers refresh themselves and open themselves to the struggles of each other and their communities.

**The arts can make us comfortable with the role-shifting that is part of community transformation.** A Buddhist priest became a performing artist in Nobuko’s Los Angeles creation. A drug dealer—Big Man, one of the leaders of the Village of Arts and Humanities—slowly left his old life behind and became a sculptor in Lily’s north Philadelphia neighborhood. We need in some ways to become new people in any new world we hope to create, and the arts can help us work that out.

**Through the arts, we can deal with harsh realities and transform them through the act of creation as a spiritual practice.** Here, as Lily and Nobuko both emphasized, quality is important. Beautiful creation—not defined by museums or concert halls but rooted in “the heartbeat of the community”—lifts our spirits. Sophisticated expertise in dialog with the community can create this art.

# Community Arts in Action

*“Amazingly...a beautiful mosaic emerged that built group identity and highlighted each person’s contribution to the whole.”*

—Richard Townsell, executive director  
of the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation

Art builds on small successes. This is the organizers’ mantra: come up with a small, doable solution—such as getting the city to install a speed bump that slows down fast drivers in a neighborhood—and then bigger victories seem possible. The same is true with art. You can’t really fail at making art. And by succeeding at creating something when job programs or economic development projects have failed in the past, you can build confidence, trust, and hope to take further risks and try other ways of changing your environment. You develop a sense of your own creative power. Following are stories of how we learned these lessons from our own experiences.



*At the invitation of Richard Townsell, Arnold Aprill leads residents in an arts exercise and discussion of their vision of the future of Chicago’s West Side.*



# Chicago: Shaping Visions

*“I had thought of the arts as a product—a mural, a mosaic, sculptures, or pictures. I now saw the arts as a way of thinking and making meaning in community.”*

**—Richard Townsell, executive director  
of the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation**

Richard Townsell brought Arnie Aprill to the west side of Chicago in 2004 to help conduct a major community meeting that would launch discussion of a new community plan. Lawndale Christian Development Corporation (LCDC) was one of several groups tapped by LISC (Local Initiatives Support Corporation), a national organization, to involve the community in a major envisioning that would guide investment in the neighborhood. But Richard knew that a true community-driven discussion could be derailed by the planning experts if they assumed they would run the meeting.

## **A Simple Exercise**

Instead, Richard invited Arnie to come and lead the group in a major visioning exercise that Arnie had done at the first meeting of our whole Leadership for a Changing World group in November 2003. It was simple: At that November meeting, Arnie had asked us to jot down some of our images of leadership, whether positive or negative, then cut them out from colored construction paper. One symbol showed a person with a dollar sign coming out of his mouth—money talks? Someone else displayed people holding hands in a circle. A third depicted two people on a city street shaking hands. Arnie then pasted our colorful cutouts on the wall in three rows, so that we would see our ideas in relation to those of other people and build a deeper understanding. He had learned this cut-paper mural process from Bernard Williams.

“The results are consistently beautiful and inclusive of multiple points of view, and they produce lively discussion and analysis among all the participants. It is literally a visioning process, because it translates ideas into images one can see, allowing viewers some distance on the ideas, and opportunities to consider how the ideas interact with each other to suggest new options,” says Arnie.

It is not as though Richard and LCDC were closed to the arts. Even before the LISC planning meeting, they had created award-winning housing, and even a mural or two in the neighborhood. But drawing on the arts was usually an afterthought. By inviting Arnie to the meeting, Richard included visioning through the arts at the start of a planning process that usually is dull and driven by outsiders who have done it many times before.

The experts had their say—by cutting out their vision for the neighborhood just like everyone else. It was a leveling exercise that put the experts at least for that crucial moment at the same level as the 200 local business owners, school children, seniors, gang members, community activists, and plain old neighbors who came to the initial meeting.

By using familiar materials (paper, scissors, masking tape) and “simple” tasks (write some words about what you’d like to see in the neighborhood, draw a simple outline, cut it out, tape it up), Arnie and Richard created an invitation for the neighbors to speak about what could be an intimidating topic: community planning. It encouraged community members to assume new roles and to investigate new capacities, which continued into the committee work that followed.

## **Personal Transformations: Richard Townsell**

At the start of the LCW meeting, Arnold Aprill led us in the cut-paper mural process. I was skeptical along with other hard-scrabble community organizers from around the country. We are going to cut out paper and make a mural, I thought. What have I gotten myself into? Arnold asked us to cut out pictures or words that described our hopes and our fears about leadership. People were self-conscious about their art, and Arnold assured us that we were not going to put it up in a museum.

Slowly, we began to stick our work up on the wall. I had a lot of fun doing the pieces that I put up. I immediately thought that this process could be used in the community, as we were engaging in a comprehensive planning process for the next ten years for our neighborhood. I saw the arts as an invaluable tool in helping the community create a vision about its future. The more I thought about it, the more I realized that the arts could serve as a democratizing tool to level the playing field between experts and novices.

## **Building Relationships**

Together, Arnie, Richard, and the neighborhood group expressed a core value of LCDC: Community development is more about building relationships than it is about building buildings. By writing down important ideas in small groups, creating individual images, arranging the individual images into collective images, and discussing the patterns that emerged, they created a positive dynamic between individual expression and collective decision-making, and presented concrete demonstrations of relationship building.

The idea of the cut-paper mural exercise is not to create museum quality results. It is an inclusive process reflecting LCDC's belief that relationships build buildings better than buildings build relationships.

The democratizing nature of the activity (one artistic "vote" per person in the mural creation) allows nay-sayers to have their voice without controlling the conversation with their negativity, and problem-solvers to reframe the conversation in useful new ways. For example, under the topic of "Recreation," one Lawndale resident added the image of a bookstore, noting the absence of one in the neighborhood. This was an important new insight that could easily have been left out of community planning.

In planning, the impulse is to try to go faster. The mural exercise slowed people down, while providing satisfying public evidence that their voice was valued — and providing a reference point for looking back on early decisions. In other words, it created context. It also made tangible the gifts of neighbors so all could see each other's contribution, while building people's sense of themselves as the potential authors of their own destiny. We saw how the arts assist democratic discourse across large groups of people and create guideposts for planning. We also saw how much time it takes to truly nurture a community vision.

***The idea of the cut-paper mural exercise is not to create museum-quality results. It is an inclusive process reflecting LCDC's belief that relationships build buildings better than buildings build relationships.***

# Philadelphia: Claiming the Right to Beauty

*“We take where it’s broken and begin to work on it by planting seeds, which are inspired ideas. Turn the deficit in a neighborhood, and make it work for you.”*

— Lily Yeh, director (retired) of the Village of Arts and Humanities

Our visit to Lily Yeh’s home base, Philadelphia, brought us to a city that values the arts. City-sponsored murals transform blank building walls throughout the downtown area. We visited a neighborhood where a single muralist who works in mosaic lured volunteers to help enact his vision on wall after wall and building after building, creating an overwhelming presence that he hoped would bring joy to the community.

When we finally arrived at the eight square blocks that are the “heart” of the Village of Arts and Humanities in north Philadelphia, we realized that this was different from the first projects we had seen. This was not art to make the city comfortable for the elite, nor was it one man’s vision plastering a neighborhood. This was more community art, created collaboratively, at least in part. It was art that built hope, even amidst the 30 percent unemployment rate. There, across a total of 250 blocks, the arts organization motivated by Lily and her performing arts allies drew on her belief that “everybody has an inner light, each is equal, and together we can burn like a big torch.”

***We noticed that Lily and her allies had done a lot of their artwork and community development activities under the radar. This was not development driven by the vision of city planners.***

In the core blocks, near Germantown Avenue, lot after lot was transformed over the course of 18 years into art parks. Initially, 80 percent of the core blocks were scarred with abandoned, rock-strewn lots or crumbling buildings. Now, in the same area, you will see a garden where Lily and a neighborhood crew painted children’s own small drawings of flowers giant-sized on the side of a three-story building. Another garden has a mural of angels representing the Christian, Buddhist, and Muslim faiths overlooking a sculpture garden that is a haven for community rituals and performances.

Neighbors point to the gardens with pride, remarking that people come from all over the world to walk through their streets. And through the Village’s children’s theater, teens travel the world to perform plays written to express the challenges and beauty of their experiences. They know that poverty is not the sum total of who they are. Now other people know it too.

## Guerilla Art

Lily and her neighbors took abandoned, rubble-strewn lots and did not accept that they must be ugly. Lily inspired the neighborhood—starting with the children—with the idea that it could be different. We saw beautiful tiles of a common theme on Village buildings and scattered like mosaics in the sidewalks, visually tying the community together.

Eventually the Village sponsored coming-of-age and other rituals in the gardens, along with a health program and day care center. They renovated buildings. They launched a more traditional initiative to revitalize the neighborhood at the prompting of local businesses. But it was the hope in the gardens that nurtured the sense that they could do more and improve life in the neighborhood.

We noticed that Lily and her allies had done a lot of their artwork and community development activities under the radar. This was not development driven by the vision of city planners. They created, not a frontal attack, but a more subtle lateral move that did its job before people in power noticed, thus laying groundwork that others could build on. It was also multigenerational, bringing children and teens in as responsible partners and creators, and multi-ethnic, in the sense that Lily is an immigrant from Taiwan, and the neighborhood is largely African American. Richard wondered how much the positive stereotypes about Lily being a “crazy Chinese lady,” as Lily put it, helped disarm the neighbors and open them to her vision.

From Lily’s point of view, the collaboration transformed her as much as it did the community: “North Philadelphia rooted my identity that was confused as an immigrant. They helped me. I didn’t help them!”

### **A Burst of Ideas**

Visiting the Village seemed like the starting point for our thinking. We saw how art could provide an open space to transmit possibilities. We saw that you can give people fertile ground for creative freedom. And a group that comes together around a mural can do other things—clean up a corner, register voters. We sorted out the relationship between ego and vision, which Nobuko pointed out are sometimes confused. “Leaders have vision and an energy to push things forward,” she said. But as Diana added, some ego is necessary to ward off those who would dismiss the vision.

We recognized that people still feel that their voices are small and frail. We asked, “How do you nurture this voice outside the system? How do you maintain it coherently? Can a community express a sense of discrete identity, not just in relation to the mainstream?” It must be said that while walking around, Richard, who builds quality housing in an economically impoverished Chicago community, saw the lots not only as beautiful art parks but as spaces where housing could be built. The tiny row houses remaining were mostly decrepit. The neighborhood needed not only beauty but better housing stock too!

# Los Angeles: Making Great Leaps Forward

*“Artists should be in the community.  
Their participation raises the level of regular people.”*

—Nobuko Miyamoto

Over the course of almost a year in Los Angeles, Nobuko created Sacred Moon Song, a performance bringing together a dozen people of various faiths and ethnicities. Some poets and artists were among them, but also a chiropractor, a massage therapist, and others with no background in the arts.

## Theater in a Temple

Nobuko began by bringing 75 people together in a Los Angeles Buddhist temple to tell their families' stories, creating an atmosphere of trust and openness. The conversation tapped into memory so often lost at the societal level.

***Her struggle is to make a creative social space,  
or ‘demilitarized zone,’ where something new can be  
created, where people hold onto the strength of  
their community’s stories but don’t get stuck there.***

The stories people told in that temple were later told on stage at the David Henry Hwang Theater in late July and early August 2004, performed with movement choreographed in collaboration with Nobuko. At the heart of the performance was a dialog between a cast member who was Muslim (and happened to be Nobuko's son) and a cast member who was a Buddhist priest originally from Japan. They had been curious about one another's faith, and they built on their real-life discussions to script their performance.

Afterward, while sharing a meal with the cast, Tomomi Kanemaru, a visual artist, discussed the performance's significance: “I strongly feel that most wars or fights are caused by fear. The fear is coming from the feeling that we don't know each other well. Once we talk and know each other, we can find that all of us are the same.”

“The show had such an overwhelming love for God (in all forms) and people (in all forms) that the energy was kinetic,” said Ariel Robello, a poet who performed. “No one who was involved with or witnessed the events we held could have gone untouched. Our goal was to heal the wounds in the communities we serve. This we did, and although the world remains unhinged, we did serve as a balm for the wounded and a catalyst for change in every heart in attendance.”

Theater is ephemeral, Nobuko told us, but with video you can capture and sustain some of its spirit. So those who were not in the Japantown theater

## Personal Transformation: Arnold Aprill

This cooperative inquiry gave me an unprecedented opportunity to move my work from a set of intuitions and assumptions into explicit, articulated, intentional practices. This was an essential growth for me, because it forced me to give up working in an enclosed universe of arts education peers and to move into a wider universe of community arts organizers and social justice organizers working out of many diverse frameworks. We discovered together the language and practices that allow me to share my work and my thinking with a wider base of colleagues — to model the values of inclusion and diversity that were part of my rhetoric, but not fully part of my practice.

in July 2004 can witness on video some of the depth of connection—of the way, for example, one woman’s story of her Mexican grandmother coming to California on a burro mingled with a Japanese American man’s story of his grandparents’ internment during World War II.

## Beyond Ethnic Identity

Nobuko challenges the social polarization of people talking past one another and not allowing themselves to be transformed by other people’s lives. Her struggle is to make a creative social space, or “demilitarized zone,” where something new can be created, where people hold onto the strength of their community’s stories but don’t get stuck there. Her own background as a founder of the Asian arts movement, as well as her contact with black nationalists, means she deeply understands the strength of nationalism and a strong ethnic identity. But she feels we cannot remain in that state, and one way to move forward in an atmosphere of trust is through telling our stories to each other and creating public performance from it.

The hope reaching deep within her work is that people can learn to work across cultures—and the art they create together won’t hang in a gallery but like rivulets feed into the creation of a new river, a new social whole.

## Brooklyn Bridges

In February 2005, Nobuko nurtured more streams of communication in a day-and-a-half workshop with women leaders in Brooklyn. Abby invited her to conduct a retreat for Brooklyn Bridges, an interfaith group that started after September 11th. Its leaders were tired, overwhelmed by the trials of challenging the government in its treatment of Muslim Americans and creating opportunities for Brooklyn neighbors to learn more about each other. In the group were Arab American women working to create domestic violence services for their community; two Latina leaders, one the head of a CDC, the other head of a school; a Trinidad-Tobago peace activist; a Palestinian American mom; and a Jewish civil liberties activist. Nobuko did not lead us in political discussions but asked us to act out key moments from our families’ and our own stories. We watched the remembered pain of a mother fleeing Palestine for Lebanon to escape war in the 1960s. We felt the humor and tragedy as one of our group acted out her grandmother’s flight from the Nazis through mountains, hopelessly trying to keep her middle-class dignity intact.

Because we shared those personal stories, we created the base for working together into the future, even if we deeply disagreed with one another about other issues.

And we healed ourselves not only through our storytelling, but through body movement. We felt how separated we were not just from one another, but from ourselves as we rush to nurture our families and our neighbors while ignoring our own bodies.

### Personal Transformation: Nobuko Miyamoto

As an art maker, [this research process] expands my capability to work with people like you [organizers].

Nobuko’s cultural work rests on her insight that we all have to grow and change for the world that is coming. “The balance of majority and minority is going to shift,” says Nobuko. “So we need to be able to create community between cultures—creating something new out of the ways that we are not the same.” We need to “connect people and build interrelationships among our creative fires and imaginations outward through race, class, and gender to create real communication.”



# Oakland: Taking On the Media

*“In the midst of taking care of kids, you lose sight of the big picture.”*

—Diana Spatz, executive director of  
Low-Income Families' Empowerment Through Education (LIFETIME)

Diana Spatz is a sharp organizer who instinctively integrated the arts into her work with mothers struggling to raise their families, go to school, and defend the public assistance programs in California that make all of that possible. How do you empower women, flattened by economic and family burdens, to stand up and say, “We deserve better!” to politicians who presume that they are leeches on the state? And how do you win media attention from reporters, writers, and editors who may suffer from the same preconceptions?

Diana, who speaks in images, told us stories of how they battle for the public funds that allow them to attend college, while defending overall public support. One of the most empowering exercises for the moms came out of a simple task: “Draw a picture of what your education means to you.”

“It made people really think,” said Diana. By drawing a picture, the moms couldn’t use the same old words that often come to mind. One member realized, “Being in school gave me more control of my life, which I couldn’t have when I was stuck on welfare.”

Right before we started meeting in the spring of 2004, LIFETIME had created a “Don’t Target Our Children” campaign that successfully defended welfare spending, not by giving testimony in front of state legislators, but by communicating visible and visceral messages in unexpected ways.

To prepare for a visit to Sacramento, the California state capital, on January 12, 2004, kids and their moms painted political messages on 150 T-shirts. They wanted to replace the negative images that well-off legislators and reporters carry of poor families with new images of strength and moxie. A child from Camptonville, in northern Sierra County, admonished Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger with a small shirt that read, “Kindergarten Cop, I thought you cared about us!” On another, a mom had painted the backside of a baby, with a bull’s-eye in the middle of its diaper—don’t target our kids! After taking over the governor’s office, the moms had won statewide media attention for messages like this one from six-year-old Michaela Howerton of Oakland: “My back is too small to balance the state budget!”

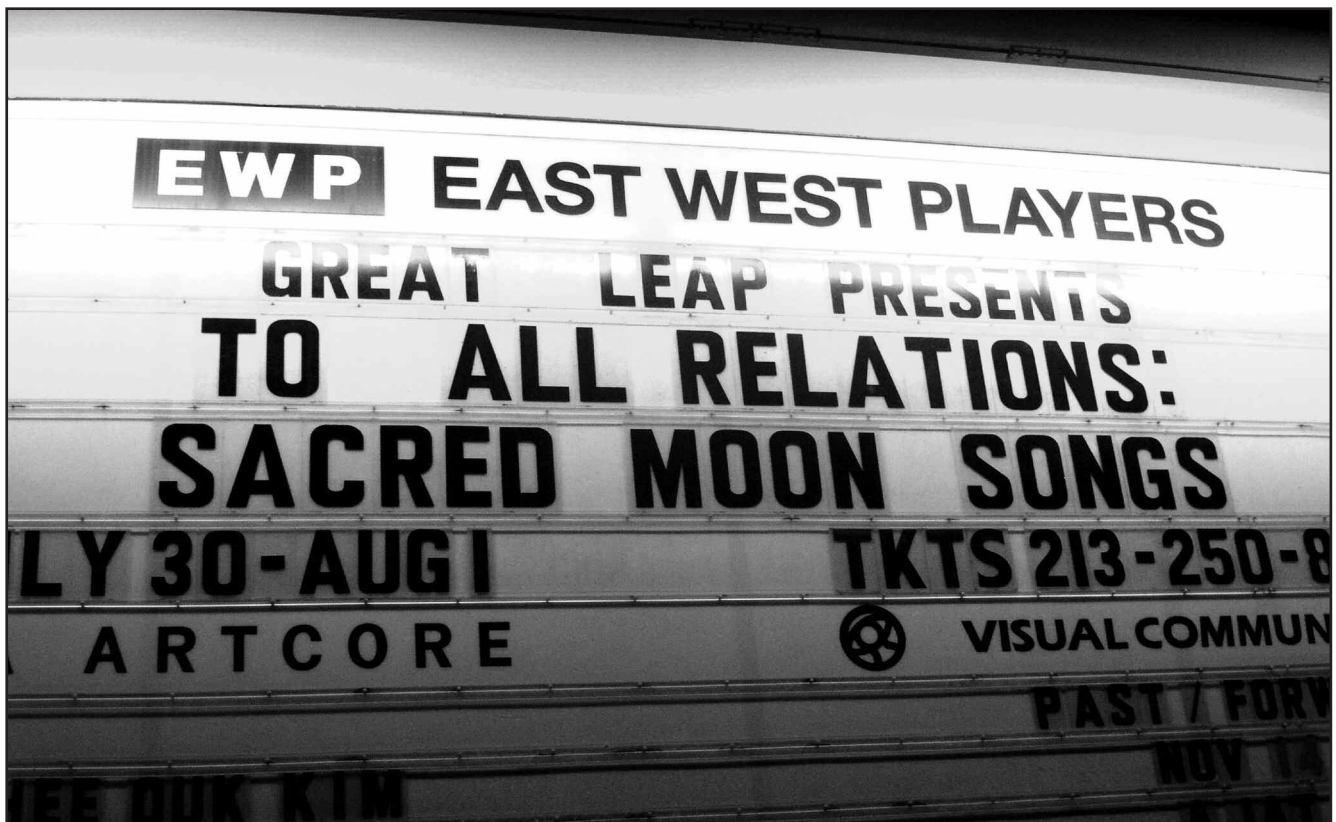
Consequently, the protest was featured in at least seven newspapers across the state, including the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*, which featured a photograph of the action with the caption, “Laundry List of Complaints.” The event was also covered by the *Sacramento Bee*, the *San Jose Mercury News*, the *Contra Costa Times*, the *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, the *Los Angeles Daily News*, the *Honolulu Advertiser*, and *Sing Tao*.

***By drawing a picture, the moms couldn’t use the same old words that often come to mind. One member realized, “Being in school gave me more control of my life, which I couldn’t have when I was stuck on welfare.”***

In addition, footage of the protest and the takeover of the governor's office was broadcast on ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox Television affiliates in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Santa Barbara, San Jose, and Sacramento. Finally, parent leaders' views on the state budget were broadcast on KITS 105.3 FM in San Francisco, KPFA 94.1 FM in Berkeley, and KZFR 90.1 FM in Chico.

Ultimately, not only did the Don't Target Our Children campaign successfully block welfare cuts to children and families—winning the first cost of living increase since 1989—but it also forced the media to see these mothers and their children as real people with value and helped change the political dynamic in the state. Through their art, the women and children transformed some ingrained cultural images that have had a real impact on politics. They made visible the real context of welfare cuts: the pain they would cause to families.

Diana added that such exercises changed the members of LIFETIME: “Having rituals and a focus on the arts in all our gatherings expands our thinking.”



*Photo: Arnold Aprill*

# Seattle: Exhibiting for Social Justice

*“Leadership needs to become an alternating current, oscillating between both sets of organizations, in which one set leads in some areas, the other set leads in others, and the collective leadership exists in a middle ground between the partners.”*

—Arnie Aprill, director of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education

The Wing Luke Asian Museum is named for the first Asian American elected official in the Pacific Northwest, a young leader who fought for civil rights and social justice in the 1950s and 1960s. He played an important role in challenging unfair housing practices that affected all citizens of color. We visited the museum, guided by its founder Ron Chew. Chew created a museum that is oriented toward social justice. For example, Japanese Americans who were interned crafted a re-creation of one of the huts in a camp. Children from a wide range of Asian American communities created an exhibit based on their festivals.

## Community Curators

In 1993, Chew and his staff organized “Executive Order 9066: 50 Years Before and 50 Years After,” the first of more than a dozen oral-history exhibitions. He favored a people-centered, story-centered approach, encouraging more than 100 volunteers—four generations of Japanese Americans—to suggest their own visions for the exhibit. Working together, the staff and the volunteers built a replica of World War II era internment barracks, similar to those that held Japanese Americans in Washington State, and filled it with artifacts and stories from that time.

Chew also spearheaded the creation of “If Tired Hands Could Talk: Stories of Asian Pacific American Garment Workers,” a 2001 project. Rather than hiring a scholarly museum curator for this exhibit, he set up a committee of 15 women garment workers, both former and current, and their children. The committee collected oral histories, gathered display materials, and designed an exhibit to illuminate the untold story of Seattle’s hidden past, the legacy of its immigrant garment workers. The result: 35 first-person oral histories, presented in English, Chinese, and Vietnamese, documenting the long hours, low wages, and nearly forgotten details of daily life in a garment factory. In 2002, the Western Museums Association honored “Tired Hands” as the region’s best exhibition.

The museum also wowed us with:

**Challenging Content:** The museum takes on challenging subjects that represent contradictory, divergent points of view. While we were visiting, there was a wonderful exhibit about the complex experiences of Asian adoptees and their largely “white” parents.

**Community Fiscal Support:** A major part of the financial support for the museum comes from the low-income residents of the International District. Like the Mexican Fine Arts Center Museum in Chicago, the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle is located in the cultural communities it is organized to represent.

**Intercultural Discourse:** People who normally would not have been attracted to a museum were drawn to Wing Luke to learn history as their neighbors had lived it. Another recent exhibit showcased the fusion of African American and Asian American youth cultures. Chew also organized a series of post-9/11 programs that focused on civil liberties, including a multi-racial forum for Japanese Americans, Arab Americans, and South Asians to discuss the dangers of stereotyping and racial profiling.

**Young Leadership:** The museum's staff is startlingly young. Chew's low-key personality, respectful tone, and quiet strength encouraged a generation of volunteers and student interns. He is also determined to nurture a new generation of leaders. "Many volunteers and student interns have now become permanent employees at the museum," he said. "Others who first nurtured at our museum have moved on to positions of responsibility at other organizations. There is a seasoned generation of individuals—now in their early 30s—emerging as leaders."

**From Representing History to Making History:** Chew hopes to achieve a multimillion-dollar goal: the restoration of the historic East Kong Yick building in the Chinatown-International District that will serve as the museum's new home. The restoration will honor the building's history. It was built a century ago by more than 170 pioneer Asian laborers, who pooled their money to build a community gathering place. The building will once again serve as a cultural magnet, a place where the community



*Flowers from the Wing Luke Asian Museum. Photo: Arnold Aprill*



can tell the story of its future. Ron took us on a tour of the unrestored building. It was eerie and thrilling to be walking through living history—the office of the Japanese building manager who was hauled off to the internment camp, the apartment of the African American tenant who couldn't find housing anywhere else, the meeting room where Chou En-Lai gave a stump speech, the hallway with the notice on how to exit the building in case of a gambling raid. The museum will invite back the family associations that used to meet there, not to create displays about their history, but to start meeting there again. A living museum.

After our extraordinary visit with Ron, Nobuko rightly insisted that we also visit the historic Panama Hotel in the International District. This restored site has a window embedded in its floor that looks down on luggage left where it lay by Japanese citizens dragged off to internment camps. The window also revealed the remains of one of the only original, traditional Japanese bathhouses in the country.

## Raising Questions

The Seattle meeting was a soul-shaking visit, conducted with soulful colleagues, and it raised important questions for us about the untapped potential for dynamic relationships between the arts, communities, and museums. The three questions the Wing Luke Asian Museum raised for Arnie in particular were:

1. What new strategies could successfully challenge the isolation of communities from museums, and museums from communities? What would make museums a living part of community discourse, as Wing Luke has become?
2. What kind of productive new relationships could exist between the worlds of contemporary art making and the world of museum exhibitions and programming?
3. What are the opportunities for meaningful dialogs between traditional cultural expressions and contemporary cultural expressions?

This is not about museums doing better outreach. This is about sidestepping the whole “outreach” model. To quote Arnie again: “Programs don’t last that only flow in one direction (from arts organizations that supposedly have culture to schools that supposedly don’t).... The outreach model is a scarcity model, in which art assumes that its value is in direct proportion to its exclusiveness, placing arts organizations in the awkward position of struggling to connect to those it has excluded. This one-directional process tends to exacerbate ethnocentric assumptions about the cultures and capacities of the communities being ‘out-reached.’”

By contrast, at the Wing Luke Asian Museum, the ideas and experiences of the community drive the collection and presentation of artifacts and oral histories, not the other way around. Also, the restoration of the East Kong Yick building will return the space into active community use—not as a representation of history, but as a place in history.

### Personal Transformation: Elise Holliday

On a personal level, this group has made me realize the power of the arts to influence each of our lives and to externalize what I’ve always known as a truth—that beauty is a right. This has made me realize with greater understanding how deeply sad it is that our schools don’t have art programs for the most part and that our communities don’t incorporate enough art. As a mother, board member, employee, community member, I will be voicing my concerns and trying to bring more attention to this.

# Learning from Our Experiences

Our cooperative inquiry inspired us to see new ways out of the dead space into which organizing for justice often falls. The creative arts proved a powerful, transformative tool both for communities and the individuals within them.

## Obstacles to Transformation

We also discovered obstacles that can prevent the creative arts from being transformative. Here is what we found:

**The class divide.** Richard reminded us of one of Saul Alinsky's insights: You have to align the poor with the middle class, or the middle class will move to the right. It is harder to bridge the class divide through the arts than it is to bridge the cultural differences Nobuko, Lily, and Abby have dealt with.

**Funders' pace and cronyism.** Program officers can be overly directive or quickly move on to support other projects, creating a roller coaster for innovators. Some find it easier to keep giving money only to big institutions, which often don't have the capacity to work at the grassroots where the community arts are most fertile.

**Older leaders don't give up control.** Outdated ideas can smother innovation, especially when they're held by leaders of a previous generation who control funding and other levers of power. This is a problem in every area of organizing, not only in the community arts.

**The arts are seen as politically irrelevant.** More research and documentation of the impact of community arts in organizing can help reverse this idea.

**Artist's ego.** Artists may begin to think that only they can be creative in a community. This is another version of the Expert Running Wild, and it is particularly treacherous while attempting cross-cultural work. Ideas of how to involve people are culturally specific. Artists cannot assume people buy into their approach.

**The arts are seen as risky or politically threatening.** The artist stereotype can work in artists' favor: It can help allow them to play and experiment. But when working in partnership with a more traditional organizer, the organizer may pull back when play gets uncomfortable or challenges preconceived ideas or institutional power. It is, after all, a risk to open up your organization to the unknown—not just to unknown ideas, but to unknown people.

**The arts can be another form of mystification.** You can create an illusion of positive change in a violent and impoverished neighborhood by painting a nice mural. Or it can impose other people's values on a neighborhood, privileging some people and denying the reality of people's lives.



**The transformative power of the arts too often stays at an individual level.** Individual people may become more open and expressive, but does that always help create a collective difference in the world? Of course not. But nothing is perfect.

## Opportunities for Scaling Up

We were frustrated at how incremental our work was. How can other people do this at home? How can we do it bigger? Here are some of our ideas:

**Involve artists in the strategic planning process of the community organizing process itself.** We need to stop thinking of incorporating the arts after community organizers embark on a plan. It has to be part of the initial strategy. The arts are not an add-on artifact or activity.

**Make your office space look nice.** So many nonprofit offices are shabby, communicating that we don't deserve better. Like ADWAS, nonprofits should endeavor to have attractive, even beautiful spaces. The same goes for Web sites. Remember, beauty is a right!

**Invest in joint planning.** We need to work together more, learn about each other's work and orientations, and go to each other's conferences.

**Count the cost of these collaborations.** It's the reality of our world. We need to budget time and dollars to enact these new relationships. It is not enough just to talk to each other.

**Document what we are learning and share what we learn.** It is important to make visible the history and practice of community arts.

**Use the documentation research to empower ourselves.** Our successes can help pressure policy people to institutionalize funding for creative space.

**Create mechanisms to innovate and spread the practice.** Through workshops and conferences, we can show artists that they can rise above being competitive individualists and entice organizers to open themselves more to the arts.

**Explore new models for discovering who we are, our histories, and where we want to go.** There is more that we can do so we don't stay stuck where we are.

## The Power of the Arts in Community Organizing

Socially conscious arts organizing and other social justice organizing can strengthen each other by using the tremendous power of the arts to:

- Make visible the creative process involved in all organizing;
- Help clarify our core visions and missions, as well as refresh our thinking with new visions;
- Evoke memory for honoring the past and creating a just future;
- Forge a meaningful sense of community among strangers, as well as old acquaintances;
- Demonstrate agency—the power to act, to make a mark, to speak out in a strong voice, to create movement;
- Help egos move beyond the self by surrendering to experiences that are larger than the self;
- Give cultures their own space to have their own voice, their own images, their own stories, and their own histories;
- Build intercultural understanding and invent new cultures across cultures;
- Remind us of our inalienable right to beauty and joy;
- Witness and heal;

- Reveal the wisdom of traditions as well as the invention of those who break with tradition; and
- Assist the passing on of leadership.

We live in a media culture. We are in a battle of ideas and values. The arts help create and bring life to ideas and make values visible. Organizing, at its best, is also a creative act, a “spiritual art,” as Arnie Aprill put it. If we, as organizers, are to join the battle, we need to pay more attention to the creative aspect of organizing and allow community arts activism to transform all of our social justice organizing.

## About the Cooperative Inquiry Participants

### ARNOLD APRILL

Director of the Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education, Arnie helps artists build collaborations with Chicago public schools and thinks about the arts in social change through networks that span the globe.

### ELISE HOLLIDAY

Board member of Abused Deaf Women’s Advocacy Services (ADWAS) in Seattle, Elise is interested in bringing the arts more into her work with ADWAS.

### FAHARI JEFFERS

Secretary-treasurer and general counsel, Fahari brings her roots in Cesar Chavez’s farm worker struggle to San Diego’s Domestic Workers United Home Care Center.

### NOBUKO MIYAMOTO

Artistic director of Great Leap in Los Angeles, Nobuko weaves spiritual space by creating public performances with groups of regular people.

### ABBY SCHER

Sociologist, organizer, and journalist of the immigrant press in New York, Abby brings experience building collaborations across communities, particularly in post-9/11 Brooklyn.

### DIANA SPATZ

Executive director of Low-Income Families’ Empowerment Through Education, Diana creatively challenges the California state government to respect parents who are trying both to raise their children and escape poverty through education.

### RICHARD TOWNSELL

Executive director of the Lawndale Christian Development Corporation on the west side of Chicago, Richard helps transform this community by building affordable housing, creating needed services such as day care and after-school programs, and organizing neighbors to take charge of their own destinies.

### LILY YEH

A painter who first came to north Philadelphia 18 years ago, Lily retired in 2004 as director of the Village of Arts and Humanities, having worked with residents to transform more than 100 abandoned lots into mural and sculpture gardens.

*The CI group also included the following members from the RCLA facilitation team: Sandra Hayes, Ed.D. candidate, and Lyle Yorks, Ed.D., associate professor, Department of Organization and Leadership, Columbia University Teachers College.*

**About the Research Center for Leadership in Action  
at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, New York University**

The Research Center for Leadership in Action (RCLA) promotes practice-grounded, social-science based, interdisciplinary research that will help strengthen both the theory and the practice of leadership in public service. The Center for Leadership in Action is based at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. It was launched in August 2003 with support from the Ford Foundation.

**About the Leadership for a Changing World Program**

Leadership for a Changing World is a program of the Ford Foundation that recognizes and supports community leaders known in their own communities but not known broadly. In addition, it seeks to shift the public conversation about who are authentic leaders to include the kinds of leaders participating in this program. Each year, Leadership for a Changing World recognizes 17 to 20 leaders and leadership groups. Awardees receive \$115,000 and participate in semiannual program meetings, collaborative research and a strategic communications effort. LCW is a signature program of the Ford Foundation in partnership with the Advocacy Institute and RCLA, NYU Wagner.

**Members of the Research and Documentation Project Team include:**

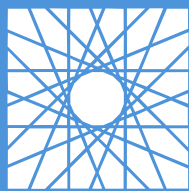
Sonia Ospina, RCLA Director and LCW Research Director  
Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla, RCLA Associate Director and LCW Program Director  
Erica Foldy, Affiliated Faculty Member  
Angie Chan, Program Coordinator  
Jennifer Dodge, Research Associate  
Sanjiv Rao, Research Assistant  
Meredith Herr, Research Assistant

**For more information about Leadership for a Changing World and the Research and Documentation Component, visit [www.leadershipforchange.org](http://www.leadershipforchange.org) or call 212.998.7550.**

**Credits**

Abby Scher wrote *Can the Arts Change the World?*  
Strategic Communications & Planning provided editorial support.  
Amparo Hofmann-Pinilla from RCLA managed the production of this booklet.  
Hampton Design Group provided design and production services for the publication.  
Arnold Aprill created the photographs for this booklet.

Published: 2006



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