

In-Habit.

Notes

Multiculturalism, Community and Diversity, A Community Roundtable

by Clayton Campbell

Multiculturalism, Community and Diversity A Community Roundtable

During 1999, the Staff, Board of Directors and Residents of the 18th Street Arts Complex in Santa Monica, California, along with a host of invited community participants, have engaged in an organizational assessment of the 18th Street Art Complex. The assessment/planning project was undertaken to review not only the governance of the organization, its staffing, financial issues, programs, etc. but to fundamentally test the multicultural assumptions which informed its programs and curatorial decisions for the previous decade.

This document consists of an initial discussion about 'multiculturalism' and how 18th Street Arts Complex is forming and realizing a philosophy consistent with its goals for the next decade. It is followed by a transcript of a "Community Roundtable" discussion sponsored by the 18th Street Arts Complex and held on March 20, 1999 at the Getty Institute in Los Angeles. In addition to a large group of invited participants from the Los Angeles arts community, key note speakers Kathryn Reasoner, Director of Headlands Art Center, Sausalito; Dan Kwong, Los Angeles artist and activist; and Thom Rhoads, Director of the Santa Monica Museum of Art, were asked to address issues of community, diversity, and multiculturalism, and how they related to 18th Street Arts Complex.

The final report and planning document is much too long to be presented here, and some of it, being technical and financial, is for in-house consumption at 18th Street.

Nevertheless, the core ideas and presentations offered herein are a valuable resource to the arts and culture field.

The organizational assessment project was made possible by a substantial grant from the Getty Grants Program, which has been quite remarkable in its level of support and encouragement. Additionally, a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Arts supplemented the Getty Grants Program primary funding, adding immeasurably to the depth of involvement the individuals in the assessment project were able to bring to their endeavors.

The 18th Street Arts Complex is unique as a multicultural arts experiment. Located in a rapidly evolving megalopolis reflective of an unprecedented diversity,, the Complex was formed to reflect Los Angeles' multicultural spectrum of artists and arts organizations. 18th Street's mission statement is simple but to the point.

18th Street Arts Complex is a nonprofit residential art center in Santa Monica that supports artists and arts organizations dedicated to issues of community and diversity in contemporary society.

Beginning with the Community Roundtable as the first event in a year long organizational assessment, 18th Street Arts Complex undertook a process to dissect, evaluate, and open the discussion around the larger values we held to be the heart and soul of this organization. The values of community, diversity and multiculturalism came up repeatedly. In any cultural discussion, naming is a crucial function, serving to get everyone on the same page so the organization can move forward and assist the artists and projects in which they have a stake. Realizing that 18th Street Arts Complex is an international model for multicultural art centers, and that the conclusions of its year long assessment could be of real value to the arts and culture field we undertook this assessment process by opening it up to as many community partners as practically possible. The true diversity of all these voices are included and built into the comments and observations we wish to share with the arts and culture field.

Any process of evaluation involves 'naming and mapping', defining terms and setting a course based on our core values and beliefs. An initial question we asked ourselves was 'What is the applied definition of 'multiculturalism' for purposes of this report?'

For our purposes, multicultural is used to describe mixed or cross cultural groups or as a general term for all of the various communities when they are working together.

As a contemporary art center of national importance, it was also necessary to define and state how artistic growth is achieved.

In its curatorial decision making process, 18th Street seeks artists who demonstrate social consciousness and spiritual awareness in a well developed art making practice. We emphasize artists who are emerging to mid career in their development, manifest the spectrum of approaches to contemporary ideas and reflect the diverse population of Los Angeles. 18th Street Arts Complex aspires to be an artist friendly gathering place, providing a physical center in a city characterized by its de-centralization.

In our value system interdependence is seen as a higher value than independence, reflective of the belief that for the individual to thrive, there must be a commitment to something larger than oneself. The notion of 'community', while fluid and elusive, will be of crucial importance to future generations of artists who move away from a modernist model of the Individual artist working and acting alone with complete autonomy.

We might now be witnessing a sea change of influence taking place within human consciousness, moving from an era of emphasis on the Individual to an epoch of Interdependence. Artists, in the next decades, will rely on 'Community' more than ever before. Contemporary art centers, and especially those which are residential in nature, provide the structure for explorations of community, artmaking and diversity, growth of the individual within a socially redemptive sphere of influence. At the bottom of the cultural conversation in which each individual is engaged, resides the fundamental truth that real change can never occur unless individuals are willing to come together to discuss their differences. An art center, especially one which has a multicultural orientation, should provide the ground for these crucial conversations.

The many metaphors of Interdependence, and the interlocking harmonies of Natural processes in which everything is a part are often misunderstood and degraded. Western Culture is in a waning Age of Enlightenment with its reliance on empirical and scientific proofs. Ultimately this empiricism may be antithetical to Creativity and the spiritual life of the artist (and the institutions which support them), who must enter into a space within which 'unworldly' dreaming is encouraged and interpreted.

Challenges

As we look forward to the next decade, there are four main themes which present unusual challenges for 18th Street Arts Complex., as well as many other kinds of institutions. We view these challenges in a positive spirit inspite of the difficulty associated with some of them. And while Los Angeles has its own particular set of societal dynamics which inevitably shape our thinking, in the broader sense the challenges which we speak about are applicable to everyone in the arts and culture field.

I. Living in An Era of Reasonable Racism

After several decades of intensive and often inconclusive civil rights activity, we have reached a plateau. There is a class conscious, society wide, subtle agreement that a certain degree of racism is to be expected, tolerated, even desired as an implicit condition of American life. It becomes a means of maintaining civil order, insuring economic survival and dominance. We see 'reasonable racism' manifested in our educational systems, immigration policies, use of language, penal system, class structures and relationship to capital.

In the next decade Race, even though intellectually it may be viewed as a social construct, will again be an enormous issue and hot button in multicultural environments. The depth of feeling around unresolved issues, the well spring of bitterness and resentments which have accumulated (particularly in Los Angles after the 1992 unrest), and the growing underclass of an economically, socially and racially disenfranchised population cannot be suppressed indefinitely. The institutionalization of gang life, the spread of a drug based shadow economy and deterioration of public services are the signposts of serious troubles ahead.

The challenge for 18th Street as a multicultural art center is to keep the discussion around these issues alive and in public view, proceeding proactively as opposed to the previous strategies of reactive thinking.

The artists we wish to support view themselves as part of the mainstream discussion around the host of social issues under review, and are able to present creative solutions for them. The need for widely accessible critical forums becomes paramount so the discussions artists are undertaking can be continued, expanded and heard. These forums can take place within an organizations programs, presentations,

publications, and its electronic presence. Support of community based arts efforts is an even more effective means of sourcing collaborations between an art center and its constituents, and their respective audiences and communities.

II. Technological Change

On one hand, we are engaged in a process of rapid globalization through the almost instantaneous spread of information affording access to ideas and images heretofore unavailable. This fact of life will only increase, and with it a mixing of cultural imperatives and diffusions, creating dynamic cross cultural exchanges, unanticipated art forms, modes of communication and projects of lasting import.

In another context, humanistic heritage can be inadvertently suppressed in favor of a new technological culture. This new culture can speed up the exchange of information but cannot establish a perspective on itself. Art, poetry, and cultural heritage provide a view finder for the individual.

There are two dimensions to the challenge of technological change. which can be successfully addressed by a multicultural arts organization; first, engage and support a younger and or new audience which is 'plugged in' by supporting technologically based art forms. This would include film, video, digital imagery, and computer based image processes.

Second, utilize electronic technology to its full capacity in order to disseminate artists ideas, create forums for conversations, and to distribute the 'communal memory' of the arts center and its artist projects.

In a practical sense, this means wiring schools, art and community centers for the 21st century, acquiring reasonable tools and forming partnerships for access to resources, and keeping an up to date curatorial overview of the rapidly developing changes taking place in this globalized arena. In a sense this is the easiest of the challenges. Generally there is acknowledgment, and potential financial support to accomplish these basic goals.

Second, as much as there is a corresponding new audience, there is a large and growing 'underclass' of technologically illiterate and alienated persons., especially

among the young. On a human level there is a profound cynicism, despair and paralysis in the face of relentless consumerism, information, and technology. It manifests in social dysfunction; a graphic and not uncommon example would be children taking weapons to school, joining gangs and killing each other. In American urban centers the phenomena of youth violence is becoming endemic. Many more examples of social dysfunction and reaction could be cited as more and more people are left out of the 'information revolution.'

An urban, multicultural art center is challenged to; one, make its artists and technology as available as possible, and two, be thorough in insisting there is a humanistic, understandable content at the heart of its involvement with technology.

The role of the artist and arts organization as Mentors is paramount, providing basic human interactions between the privileged and the disenfranchised. The Mentoring role overlaps into all areas of influence an arts organization may have, and within the area of Technology the responsible use of technology made available through education and arts programs is key to the Mentors hip role.

III. Shifting Constituencies

As discussed in the first challenge, a younger generation which is technologically literate will come of age in the next decade and be one of our primary new audiences. In Santa Monica where 18th Street is located, this audience is 86% European-American. This poses interesting questions for a multicultural art center. How do we engage them? What makes the Arts Complex of value to them so they will want to participate and support it? How do we address children, families and their interest in the arts? How do we raise the profile of 18th Street Art Center as a significant contemporary art center in the City of Santa Monica? What makes an art center a significant part of its city/community?

The ethnic demographics of Los Angeles County, of which Santa Monica is a part and from which most of our artist residents come, is quite different. It will shift significantly. by 2005. As just one example, 45% of the population will use Spanish as their primary language.

The ongoing shift in population raises more interesting questions for a multicultural art center. For instance; How does 18th Street reflect these shifting demographics in its programs and curatorial integrity? Does inclusion foreground artistic excellence,

yet remain mindful of class and multicultural demographics in deciding which artists can come and use the studios at the art center? Can the criteria for making these decisions remain flexible yet give a real direction in order to stress the importance of contemporary art?

The curatorial philosophy developed by 18th Street Arts Complex is an intelligent attempt to come to grips with the complex and meaningful questions 'shifting constituencies' brings up. If the first constituency of an art center is artists, as it is with the case of 18th Street, the curatorial process is key to determining how the above questions will be answered. By extension through its residential and presenting curatorial choices, we arrive at the determinant of which larger constituencies and communities the art center is going to try to reach.

An art center cannot be everything for everybody. It is best served by picking its audience and making a strong commitment to serving this finite group. Nevertheless, a multicultural arts organization in an urban setting like Los Angeles, will want to keep a rotating mix of people from as many communities and art making practices as possible on its roster in order to fulfill its mission. Part of the curatorial skill is not only determining excellence of the art making, but true need of the artist for the organizations services, and the symbiotic chemistry's which can grow out of a collaborations within a multicultural artist environment.

IV. Ecological Necessity

The UN report 'Global Environmental Outlook 2000' makes a devastating assessment of the future of the human race in the next century. These predictions are not new, but what is new is that they have finally made their way into international conversation through the United Nations. The report posits we will be beset by global environmental degradation and civil disruption on a terrible scale if environmental trends continue unchecked. The solution is averted by an increase in political will and application of existing eco-friendly technology.

18th Street can proactively address this challenge by the greening of 18th Street, acting as a model for artists, arts organizations and the City of Santa Monica. As it is purchasing its property, and is located geographically in a region with abundant solar energy yet a limited and increasingly costly supply of clean water, 'greening' the physical plant is logical and proactive in the best sense.

It is also crucial to undertake this 'greening' process in order to insure fiscal stability in the face of rising costs of resources and physical maintenance of the property. Application of energy saving systems, and a goal for self sufficiency of the physical plant is not unreasonable. Any arts organization would be wise to address this fourth challenge, as most are already under severe financial constraints that will only increase over the next decade aided by rising energy costs. For inspiration, arts organization can look to the many artists who are now involved in environmental processes as an integral part of their art practice. In a residential arts community, 'environmental' art projects should be encouraged which deal with site, place, and restoration of the habitat.

Contemporary art institutions value education, ideas and communication. Art centers strive to create a safe haven for the exchange of ideas amongst diverse communities. The best of our institutions wish to inculcate amongst artists the desire to cross social, political, spiritual, geographic and intellectual boundaries, mapping a way for artists in the next generations to follow.

A multicultural institution is open to many perceived values, sensibilities and truths. By integrating art into the larger life of the community he/she serves and is an intrinsic part of, artists are sharing messages of healing and hope to a world with formidable challenges and sometimes, ineffable sadnesses. We seek to encourage artists who actively design the vehicles of communication which carry us across the bridges of understanding the arts collectively construct.

We always seem to stand at a crossroads, but it is true that the decisions we make will resonate not only throughout the rest of our lives, but into the lifetimes of generations to come. Humankind faces formidable challenges and acute problems, some of which must find resolution in the next twenty years. But we also have an unprecedented abundance of human energy, enthusiasm and incredible creativity constantly at work in the arenas of the arts and sciences. There are big questions for artists and the institutions which facilitate their efforts to ask of Culture. We have been asking these questions for awhile, and they remain on the top of our cultural agendas. Absolutely paramount to any cultural discussion in the next decade will be, can contemporary Western art be integrated into Life as a holistic force, and not stand outside it as a narrow specialization? Artists in the coming decade will have to continue to approach the problematic duality's which provide keys to either understanding and compassion or the seeds of confusion and darkness; art and product, the poetical and the political; the pagan and the religious; the material and spiritual.

Contemporary art centers can be a locus for human creative power, and offer solutions to societal and global challenges through art and imagination. They can be a model wherein creative potential is directed towards a celebration of human aspirations, empowering individuals, families and communities to fashion better lives for themselves.

The legacy of an art center is the art work it has helped engender. In a multicultural environment this will include a broad spectrum of ideas, philosophies, educational concepts, and objects and actions of innumerable distinction. It must be believed that Art can affect a transformation in those who encounter and participate with it.

As we move into the next century, what would happen if we really learned to listen? What if every individual crossed a cultural boundary and shared their ideas? What if each of us became a teacher? What if each of took only one action to heal a wound? What if we used our creativity to enrich our environment? What if everyone were an artist?

On Behalf of the 18th Street Staff and Board of Directors

Clayton Campbell

Co Executive-Director, 18th Street Arts Center