

Community Cultural Development

The Next Generation

Rene Yung

*Artist Rene Yung's presentation of this paper generated lively discussion at a forum of the Arts Loan Fund of Northern California Grantmakers, in October 2006. It was written just as Arlene Goldbard's new book, *New Creative Community*, was published. Although Yung refers to an earlier publication (*Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*, by Don Adams and Goldbard, 2001), she touches on many of the same themes discussed by the authors of "The Art of Social Imagination" (page 27 in this Reader) and reveals how the ideas have been adopted by an artist in practice.*

When I tell people that I work in community-based art, the typical response, including from well-educated professionals, is: "Oh you do murals!" And sometimes: "Is that like, social work?" And the really depressing one: "So you must be a volunteer?" And again, from gallerists I often get a pitying look like I have stooped to make my daily bowl of rice, or, currently, from some peers I get the opposite response: "Social Intervention! It's big right now!" This is not to denigrate the merit and importance of murals, social work, or volunteering, or to wax cynical about the art market. But it does point to a big problem facing community-engaged practice: a lack of public understanding and perceived value. This stems partly from the checkered history of community-based arts in this country and the different names the work came under; partly from the prevailing American perception of culture in general; and partly from the changing, hybrid nature of the practice itself.

In the Rockefeller publication *Creative Community*, Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard promoted the term "community cultural development"

for community-engaged cultural practice. What I think is most important about this term is its framing, and the relationships between these three words. The perspective is framed around community — the larger context of a group of people with shared concerns and interactions — rather than around the practitioners as sole creators who create an impact on the community uni-directionally. The term “cultural” expands the approach to a broader range. People often have preconceived, narrow notions about what “art” is, whereas “culture” pertains to a range of “values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and assumptions” that may vary from community to community. Tom Borrup has compared culture to a computer's operating system — the system that gives people and organizations “the capacity to communicate and function.” This expanded cultural terrain is fertile ground for creative innovation.

In community cultural development, culture functions as a connector between the community and its development. It is a catalyst and channel for a dynamic process of development, both for the community and the collaborating practitioners. This definition situates the practice on its own terms as an exciting and potent cultural bridge and innovative form, rather than on the misconception of it as a compromised art form somehow “dumbed-down” by populist consort or an unscientific indulgence fringing social services.

As Adams and Goldbard also pointed out: community cultural development is a cultural response to social conditions. This is a key definition that summarizes the urgent timeliness and connective power of the practice. In my experience, community cultural development (CCD) can effectively and uniquely address cultural concerns that are imbedded in social problems, concerns that social institutions often are not set up to deal with. For example, in my collaborative project with a H.U.D. residence for low-income immigrant seniors in Seattle, the process of deep community engagement uncovered not only individual needs related to larger questions of aging and cultural marginalization, but also historical friction between Korean and Japanese residents and between different social-economic classes within the same culture. By acknowledging and expressing the community's complex character, multi-faceted artworks integrated into

the building architecture bridged these differences and created a new sense of belonging for the residents.

CCD can be both a “wedge” driven in to loosen social-cultural entrenchments and a bridge between and within communities. In that capacity, CCD also reintegrates art into society, not as capitulation to the policy trend that evaluates artistic legitimacy in quantitative social and economic terms, but as a sincere movement toward reanimating the vital link between the practice of creativity, the practitioners, and the people they live and work amongst. It is perhaps a twenty-first century re-visiting of the shamanistic integration of artists in earlier societies — indeed, it may express a hunger for deeper connection and a desire to actively contribute toward positive social change through the artist's chosen path.

In the five years since the publication of *Creative Community*, technological developments, globalization, and demographic and economic shifts have intensified social tensions and are reshaping the cultural landscape. Much has been written on the subject and the themes identified in the recent working paper from the Irvine Foundation on the arts in California (see Reader, vol. 17, 3) clearly also have an impact on community cultural practices. But as a response to social conditions, CCD practice is by definition encoded with its own parallel evolution and reinvention. It has a viral potential, in that sense, to take on the characteristics of a trend, not in order to fit in, but in order to gain entry and to initiate change.

This next-generation CCD has many of the same characteristics as the practice it evolved from and differs primarily in degrees of focus and in attitude. It is freely hybrid and cross-disciplinary, so that, for example, story-telling, a community garden, and media literacy might encompass related parts of the same process of community development. In a current project, I am exploring ways to develop inter-generational media literacy and youth employment as extensions of a public art project based on visual art and a digital archive of community narratives, in an urban planning context. Next-generation CCD is often layered and addresses complex social relationships, rather than a single thesis. It looks to sustainable community

development, rather than a short-term project. I think a key difference of this work is its adaptive rather than resistant attitude. It is entrepreneurial, asset-based, and strategic, to match the moving target of changing social conditions.

In spite of the current “creative economy” buzz and the academic interest in arts and community-engagement as a field, community cultural development faces many challenges. Even as exciting innovations in it are taking place, there is a sense of beleaguerment, and especially among long-time practitioners, of battle fatigue. The blurred definitions of community-practice also blur ethical considerations in working with the stuff of people's real lives in the community. Under-recognition presents obstacles in support and funding of this fluid practice in a genre-based tradition, and the unique case-by-case character of community contexts doesn't fit within the “best practices” model of award patterns. Additionally, the process-based, soft, qualitative emphasis of the practice confounds evaluation metrics.

Community-based art practice is at a critical juncture, full of potential, but facing serious challenges. I envision community cultural development as a field in its own right, uniquely poised to address the evolving complexities of current social conditions as a fluid, multi-directional approach that bridges cultural, social, planning, and design disciplines. I believe it can be most powerful as an integrated practice in the civic structure, equally emphasizing the highest artistic imagination and aesthetic standards, as well as the most powerful community development.

To achieve its potential, CCD must address its means of financial support and its piece-meal, product-oriented implementation. To improve communication with policy-makers and funders, it needs an appropriate evaluation vocabulary. To increase public awareness and understanding, national-level dialogue about community-engaged cultural work needs to be generated. And to support the continued growth of cultural developers, ethical training methodologies must be devised.

Rene Yung is a visual artist living and working in San Francisco, California. She grew up in colonial Hong Kong before emigrating to the United States. Her work combines visual imagery with text to explore culture and identity. She exhibits in museums nationally and internationally, engages in public art projects, and received the Creative Work Fund Award in 1997. She is also a writer and an award-winning graphic designer. © Rene Yung 2006

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