

BOOK REVIEWS



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book review editor

Arlene Goldbard. (2006). *New Creative Community: The Art of Cultural Development*. Oakland, CA: New Village Press. 268 pp., \$19.95 (paper). ISBN: 978-0-9766054-5-4.

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I can imagine that *New Creative Community* will be a maddening book for many readers. To start with, it seems to be intended for two types of consumer: a general reader curious to know more about the topic and community arts practitioners needing to see their own profession in a broad context and perhaps also needing their flagging spirits raised. The book is neither autobiography nor history, exhaustive survey, global comparison, cultural facilitators' manual, nor cultural theory, even though it contains elements of all of these. Artists may find the book's emphasis on community building overly optimistic and program-focused, while sociologists and social workers may deplore the privileging of art as an agency for change. But I believe it is precisely this marginal status between many different disciplines and perspectives that make it an important text for all these categories of readers.

Goldbard's fundamental thesis is that, at least in the United States, elitist concepts of art prevent grass roots community culture from developing an important role in negotiating social diversity. She traces the growing gulf between elite and community culture, explains how this is an indicator of submerged and potentially dangerous conflict, and offers a blueprint for supporting community culture as a way of enhancing harmonious diversity.

Goldbard is well placed to make this argument. She is a veteran of numerous community arts campaigns from the 1960s to the present, and is not afraid to give examples from her own experiences to illustrate her thesis. She rehabilitates buzz words from the 1970s such as "development," "alternative," "democracy," and "community" itself. During the 1980s and 1990s these terms became somewhat debased through overuse, over-simplification, or association with partisan ideologies, but Goldbard, through her penchant for case studies and her strong historical perspective, breathes fresh life into the words. In her history of community arts in the United States, she goes back to 19th century anti-slavery movements, but she concentrates on the 1930s, Popular Front activities, artistic initiatives derived from Roosevelt's New Deal, and alternative/minority cultural movements in the 1970s and 1980s (Chapter 5). She feels that the cold wind of privatization ushered in by Reagan's presidency blew through the U.S. cultural landscape, affecting attitudes up to the present. This helped to impose what Goldbard calls a "standardized middle-class culture"; it led to the draining of public support of the arts from multicultural and minority programs ("betting on the underdog") and concentrating instead on "red carpet institutions" (p. 201).

When discussing contemporary activism, Goldbard doesn't try to formulate taxonomies of cultural movements and programs. Instead she provides a few vivid examples of significant trends. The closing of the San Antonio-based Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in 1977, for instance, illustrates the way emergent Christian fundamentalism made a successful backlash against a program supporting Hispanic and gay rights (Chapter 7). In a more recent example,

Goldbard also describes the work of H2H (Holler to the Hood) in Whitesburg, Kentucky, as typical of what she calls “the new hybridity” (p. 221); its use of old-fashioned face-to-face culture (such as theater), community media (such as local radio) and global media (especially the World Wide Web) shows how 21st century groups are turning their back on low-key, ad hoc activism and taking advantage of reshifting global cultural patterns to raise their profile. Some readers familiar with the field of community arts may deplore the absence of their favorite projects, but that is inevitable in a book attempting so many theoretical goals in addition to case studies.

In fact, one attractive feature of the book is the mix between theory and practice. Goldbard is by no means shy of theory, drawing liberally from Paulo Freire, Augusto Boal, Frederick Koch, and Franz Fanon. But she is always keen to link theory with practice by providing case studies or descriptions of workshop techniques. The relationship goes both ways, as can be seen from her titles of chapters 3, 4, and 6 (“A Matrix of Practice,” “An Exemplary Tale,” and “Theory from Practice”). For readers who are unfamiliar with what community arts work is all about, Chapter 4, simply but without condescension, outlines a typical campaign from planning through implementation to action and evaluation.

Although the United States is her main focus, Goldbard is constantly aware of global trends, derived no doubt from her organization of and participation in international arts-based conferences. Running through *New Creative Community* is a motif based on the irony that the United States claims global, cultural hegemony through its media industries, but is under-developed in its support for homegrown, grass-roots cultural projects. Here it has much to learn from European state-subsidized arts industries, or from such Third World movements as Latin American Theatre of the Oppressed or African Theatre for Development. While cultural movements outside of the United States tend to see their work as a weapon in the struggle against cultural imperialism, Goldbard would like to link such strategies to U.S. “cultural wars” (Chapter 7).

One of the most valuable aspects of the book is the way it deals with some of the major ethical and strategic dilemmas faced by community arts practitioners. For example, in Chapter 7, Goldbard deals very sensibly with the problem of continuity of skills from one generation to another. She recognizes that practitioners from her own generation have huge reservoirs of skills to hand down to the next, but also that their guru status might stand in the way of younger artists wishing to experiment with newer media or strategies. Another dilemma that arts facilitators constantly face is the legacy of indigenous local traditions and values on subcultures seeking their identity in a complex, multicultural environment. This may lead to conflicts between such traditions and the values of the broader national culture. To what extent, for example, should an arts facilitator tolerate sexist, homophobic, or even ethnocentric attitudes simply because they are part of a minority culture’s traditional discourse? Goldbard handles this ethical minefield sensitively, summing up her argument with a quotation from Jewish theologian Mordechai Kaplan: “The past has a vote, but not a veto” (p. 152).

Probably the greatest strength of *New Creative Community* is found in the last two chapters (8, “The Field’s Developmental Needs,” and 9, “Planning for Community Cultural Development”). Many books on arts-related topics are strong on analysis but weak on recommendations. By contrast, Goldbard has obviously thought hard about what U.S. community arts practitioners should do to move away from the marginalization that state policies and corporate investment have created. She provides a practical road map that has arguably utopian aims but achievable, bullet-pointed objectives.

Finally, the book is reasonably priced, with relevant photographs, a very useful short glossary, and a selective, but not too academic reading list. For those readers willing to step out of conventional binaries of “art for art’s sake” at one extreme and art as a tool for social engineering at the other, Goldbard’s eclecticism should provide a stimulus for reflection on intercultural community building in a globalized world.