

Art and Upheaval: Artists on the Worlds Frontline¹

William Cleveland

Imagine working in a theater company for no money 12 hours a day, six days a week crafting performances that few will ever see and will likely land you in jail.

Imagine hundreds of newly minted art school graduates whose number one goal is to use their talent and creativity to advance democracy and economic justice across the land.

Imagine a solo exhibit of paintings as one of the only visual records of a reign of terror in which over 2 million people died.

Imagine an internationally recognized writers program, forced into bankruptcy and burned to the ground at the hands of an undercover government agent.

Imagine street performances and graffiti art that somehow help to bring down a brutal despot and end a decade of war.

Imagine having to cancel your afterschool dance class due to local bombing.

Imagine a Supreme Court building that is an art gallery devoted to democracy with judges as docents.

Imagine having to sit down with rival militia leaders to negotiate the individual lines of your community play.

Imagine poetry readings conducted at the barrel of a gun.

Imagine waking up everyday knowing that your work as an artist, as a curator, as an arts administrator, is critical to the survival of your people.

Imagine knowing that your artmaking could get you killed and doing it anyway.

Imagine hearing this from one of your country's most respected spiritual and political leaders.

“These images powerfully complement the words of the Bill of Rights. Given our history, they serve as an apt reminder that words, however inspiring and lyrical, have been used as much to subvert as to create. It is therefore necessary to portray our commitment to human rights in pictures which are less open to corruption.”

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These are the words of Bishop Desmond Tutu, spoken at the opening of a 1996 exhibition called Images of Human Rights and the Municipal Art Museum in Durban South Africa. These are some of the images he is referring to.

They are part of a portfolio of prints by South African artists commissioned by an organization called Artists for Human Rights. Each print represents one of the 27 articles of the new South African Bill of Rights. They also represent an important moment in the 400 year long South African struggle for freedom. A struggle in which thousands of artists, dancers, actors, writers, musicians joined the front lines as full participants.

This scene with Rev. Tutu and the others that I shared earlier are snap shots from a journey of inspiration and learning that I have had the privilege of taking over the past ten years. This journey that has taught me quite a bit about the power, and persistence of the human creative spirit. It has also taken me to some amazing places---from the US to Asia, Africa, Europe, Australia and back. A book chronicling this journey called, *Art and Upheaval: Artists on the Worlds Frontlines* will be out next year.

This morning I would like to give you a preview of coming attractions.

Listening to the list I shared earlier, some of you may be thinking how far removed some of these stories are from your own everyday experiences. At least I hope so. It might be interesting for you to know, though, that one of these actually comes from right here in the US. Anyone want to venture a guess as to which one. Anyone curious? Here's the story.

In 1965 Watts California exploded in an upheaval of violence and destruction that left 28 dead nearly 600 wounded and caused nearly 300 million dollars (in 2007 dollars) in damage. Beyond that, the conflagration left an already struggling African American community in ruins.

One of the few bright spots to emerge in the aftermath of what some call the Watts Rebellion was the creation of the Watts Writers Workshop.

Starting with a few writers as the smoke was just settling on 103rd Street, the workshop became a magnet for writers of all kinds in a community that, believe it or not, had not one library for more

than 600,000 souls. For some, the workshop was an introduction to the power of words. For others it was a needed way station to a life of writing. The work that rose up revealed a mother lode of distinctive and talented voices.

One of those voices was a young man named Amde Hamilton. Here's what Amde had to say about the power of words.

I learned the power of words in the insane asylum. I had a doctor who was insane. And he had control of me. He also happened to be really short. He had this little seat turned as high as it would go so he would be sitting high and a very low couch where you would sit so you would always be looking up at him. When we first met, we hit it off wrong. He told me I had a problem and I said I didn't have a problem. He said, explain to me then, why you don't have a problem... I thought I had a pretty nice gift for gab so I started laying it out about living in a black community and living in the ghetto in LA and this and that. When I got through, he sat back and he took every word that I said, and tore them into little pieces and threw it back into my face. He destroyed me with my own words. It made me see the power of words. I walked out of that room I said to myself, 'some day am going to learn how use that power.'

Amde Hamilton

After he was released, Amde eventually learned to harness that power at the Watts Writers Workshop. While there, he joined fellow writers Richard Dedeaux and Otis O'Solomon to form the Watts Prophets. The Prophets' 40 year history as pioneering urban poets who laid the foundations for rap, hip hop, the rise spoken word performance and mentored multiple generations of Los Angeles writers is one of the stories in *Art and Upheaval*.

One unfortunate aspect of that story which I described earlier in my opening remarks, concerns the tragic demise of the workshop. In 1973, after a run of what appeared to be extraordinary run bad luck, the workshop had to file for bankruptcy. Then, shortly after the workshop's facility burned to the ground a man named Dethard Perry admitted that he had and sabotaged the organizations finances and set the fire. The Prophets and the hundreds of writers who considered Workshop their creative home were shocked that this guy, who had been a colleague and a

worker at the Workshop would want to tear down this precious place. But they were even more shocked when it was revealed that this had happened under the direction of an FBI operation called Cointel, a covert operation aimed at undermining organizations they felt were un-American.

But like I said, this unfortunate incident is just a small part of a complex and ultimately uplifting story of the Watts Prophets and the larger fabric of stories of artists working in communities facing extreme, social, economic, environmental and military upheaval that I encountered in Cambodia, Australia, Northern Ireland, South Africa Serbia and the US---stories that are still unfolding.

Before I go too much further I should probably tell you a bit about how this whole thing got started. Back in 1996 I was invited to give a talk at a Conference much like this one in Northern Ireland sponsored by Belfast's Community Arts Forum. While I was there, I stumbled into a little community theater project that turned out to be far more than it appeared at first blush. Rather than just tell you about it I thought it might be nice to take you there. Once again, with your permission, engaging your imaginations.

Here's the scene:

It is 7:45 P.M on a winter evening. People begin to wander into a small school auditorium. Men and women greet and cluster. Children play tag in the maze of folding chairs. To an outsider, this seems like a typical community gathering. But at 8:10 P.M., when, a woman named Jo Egan asks everybody to take a seat, the rhythm of the room skips a beat. The hum of voice and laughter is swallowed by a collective intake of breath. A hundred eyes search the room looking for a safe place. In the seconds it takes for people find their seats, the crowd divides, like two families at, a "shotgun wedding."

What was not apparent before is clear now. This is not a casual convening of neighbors. No, this is a meeting of blood enemies, the first to occur in these parts during the four decades of the Troubles. But, why? Why are they here---Republicans and Unionists together, neighbor enemies in a war fueled by bigotry, hatred, and death.

One wonders, have they been compelled to attend? Is there some grievance? There are surely hundreds of grievances filling the close-in space. No, that's not why they have come. They are here to make theater. Over the next year, they will write and produce a play with director Jo Egan and playwright Martin Lynch.

The script will be about love between enemies--something they call a mixed marriage. There is hope that the play, called "The Wedding", will help them tell their stories and maybe, begin the process of healing.

I'd like you all to imagine that you are in fact that gathering of neighbors. And that I, as one of the conveners of the meeting have asked some of you to tell us why you have come.

(Selected audience members read scripted parts 1 through 8)

1. Female

Well, to be honest I'm not sure I'm here, other than the fact that this has been the only opportunity that has come up for us to sit down and do something together, and that seems better than doin nothing, like I've been doin. Oh, my name is Colleen, but you can call me Colly.

2. Male

I'm Liam. I know that there's at least ten of you on both sides of this room that have paramilitaries livin under your roof. So I figure if you're willin' to give it a try I should be willin too.

3. Female

When we was 5 years old Margaret O'Haney, sittin' over there, (*She points*) well, we used to play together over behind the Catholic school a few blocks from here. Then, as you all know, they put that wall up to keep us separated. That was 30 years ago and I haven't talked to her since. So, I figured it was about time.

4. Male

Most of you know me, but those of you who don't, I'm Martin. I'm 60 this year so, The Troubles have consumed half my life. I've done a few things during that time I'm not particularly proud of. I've been wantin' to do something to make up for some of that. But, I'm running out of time, so here I am.

5. Male

I'm Harry. My sister married a Catholic 7 years ago. We haven't seen or spoken to each other since. So I figured I knew something about what this play is supposed to be about.

6. Female

I'm Gerri, from Ballybeen. We've been doin Community Theater for the last five years or so. We've been writin' em and putin' em on ourselves, pretty much. But, you know I've come to realize we've only been telling half the story. I know it won't be easy, but thanks for doin' this.

7. Female

My name is Janie. 4 years ago this last week my lovin' husband and father of my three little ones, was gunned down on our front steps by the UDF. He died in my arms. I can see the stain of his blood every morning when I walk out that door takin' my kids to school. I know that stain will never go away for me but I want something better for them, but I feel powerless. That's why I'm here, to do a little something for my kids and me and to dull that stain a little.

8. Female

I'm Sue. I'm 16, and just I want to be in a play. Also I couldn't believe you all were doin this so I came to see what's up.

This play, *The Wedding* did, in fact, come into being. It was presented 24 times over the course of a two-month period in the winter of 1999. The play was presented in four venues-- a Protestant house, a Catholic house, a community church and a reception hall in a pub. Audiences were transported by bus to the first two locations where they crowded into the bedrooms, kitchens, and living rooms of the two homes.

In these venues the incredibly complex and difficult cultural, religious, political, and economic issues were played out among the family members and friends portrayed by the 40 plus community members that made up *The Wedding's* cast. Over the course of the play's 3 hours, the anger, hate, love, frustration, hope, and humor that have permeated this community's struggle for peace is laid bare for an audience that, becomes a part of a newly constituted family. So much so that by the end it is hard to tell where the 4th act (the wedding reception) ends and the post performance party begins.

The combination of a powerful script, and a cast comprised of the people who wrote, lived and performed the story, in the communities where they have unfolded over the last 30 years all combined make an extraordinary work of transformational theater.

The play, which had been over a year in the making, also had the difficult and dangerous roller coaster ride of the ongoing violence and the peace process as a backdrop. Its final performance began within minutes of the announcement by Ulster Unionist's that the party's council had agreed, in a close vote, to join in the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

The play's sponsor, The Community Arts Forum in Belfast is an artist-run, community-based organization that has been using the arts for twenty-five years to mitigate the violence and mistrust that has dominated community life in Northern Ireland for decades. Never the less, the mounting of *The Wedding* was an incredibly daunting and dangerous endeavor. Every line of this play was negotiated over and over and over with the participants and with Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries. Many members of the cast were warned that their involvement could be construed as a betrayal to one community or another. A number dropped out over disagreements or as a safety measure. But most saw it through. And in the end, in the words of one of the participants they created a powerful and very public symbol that “had more impact on the community than all the killings that occurred during its making.”

Following along with *The Wedding* play through the dangerous social and political minefields of its creation, coming to know the lives and histories of the people involved inspired me and humbled me. It opened my eyes to how little I knew about this thing I had practiced and studied my entire career---this simple, complex, confounding, unpredictable, magical and powerful thing you have all gathered here to celebrate—this thing we call human creativity.

So, as I said, I was inspired. I came home and wrote an article, conducted some more research and had a few conversations about a possible book about artists working in war and disaster zones. Some folks were encouraging but others thought I was crazy. They said, “Sure you might stumble on a stray artist here or there trying to survive in the trenches but, give me a break, no artist worth their salt is going to be willing or able to do serious work in these conditions.”

I thought they were wrong, but I had no idea how wrong until I started to do my preliminary book research. In a few short weeks of internet searches, conversations and with colleagues

around the world I found over 500 stories of what I was beginning to call “art and upheaval.” Since that time I have found thousands more.

I have come to know—that if you scratch the surface of a human disaster you will find artists and yes arts administrators doing amazing work in the most difficult of circumstances for a whole host of reasons. -----

To live, to eat, to kindle the human spirit, ---
 to bring peace, or to resolve conflict,
 to manifest beauty in the face of horror,
 or to reveal the ugly truth in the face of denial,
 to rally, or bring order
 or to educate and inspire,
 to entertain, to heal, ----
 and most of all to tell the story,—
 directly, obtusely, in code, as a joke,
 as a song in a pub,
 a poem or a painting on the wall,
 as a play unfolding in cramped a living room –
 as a dance in the streets.

This is the creative landscape that I found on my journey of the past 10 years. The truth is that in the face of destruction we are impelled to create. Upheaval begets both crises and opportunity. The Hindu God, Shiva dances to create as well as destroy. It’s a survival impulse that I am not sure we have any control over. In the face of the unfathomable, the senseless, we roll up our sleeves and get down to the business of trying to make sense and meaning using our creative imaginations.

But, as you know, under best circumstance conditions supporting and harnessing the creative process is no simple thing. Examining how this occurs, in devastated communities like Soweto, or Belfast or Phnom Penh was a daunting challenge. Because of this I decided to focus on a

small number of stories that could be told in great depth. I also decided to frame my inquiry with questions that would be relevant in any community, not just those facing chaos and collapse.

Here are some of them:

- *What are links between the practice of culture and contemporary civic/social redevelopment?*
- *How do the arts engender trust in communities in conflict?*
- *How do artists provide cultural validation/mentorship for youth in chronically distressed communities?*
- *How do artists make effective partnerships with groups/communities trying to make sustained community and social change?*
- *How can artists contribute to post-trauma healing with individuals and communities?*
- *What happens when culture and politics are mixed in incendiary community environments?*
- *How does art help us make sense and meaning?*

Armed with these questions and many others I jumped in. Like I said, the journey has been inspiring and exhausting and I have learned a lot. But, some of you are probably thinking, though, does a bunch of actors in Belgrade fighting Slobodan Milosevic have to do with getting butts in seats. What do artists trying to escape the Khmer Rouge or fighting AIDs in South Africa have to do getting artists paid or integrating art into the schools. What does all this have to do with the future of the arts in the Commonwealth of Virginia. A good question.

From my perspective, which is of course highly biased, The short answer is: a lot! And here are a few of the reasons why I think this is so:

First, how many of you live in communities dealing with at least one of the conditions represented in this list of questions? How about more than one? The issues here are priorities in many communities because they have a big impact on people's lives: identity, safety, change, trust in government, civic involvement, quality of life, our children's future.

We have learned that people are more inclined to support the arts when the stories, the ideas, the issues explored on our stages, in the galleries and in the concert halls somehow resonate with to the stories they are living. For the most part, the artists portrayed in this book really didn't have a choice about whether they got caught up with the difficult issues that engulfed their communities. But, most of you do have that choice. And if you do chose to engage your community in this way, the experiences of these artists from the edges offer some valuable lessons Here are a few of the things that that stood out for me.

- Be clear about your intent
- Don't do it piecemeal or halfway
- Simple is good
- Be disciplined but flexible
- Don't wait around for someone to give you permission to change the world
- Don't expect a pat on the back for your contribution to mankind.
- Don't pretend you know more than you do
- Don't force your story on people you are trying to help.
- When you make art, open your heart to the stories that are all around you
- Learn to recognize when you are in a fight
- Remember to roll with the punches
- But, know that even if you do, you are still likely to get hurt
- Laugh and play every day
- And eat hearty

Here is another reason why these stories might be relevant to what you do. You work in a society that struggles with the idea that what you do is critical to the health of the community. I think you would agree with me that that this is an old story that needs to change.

In his book, *The Great Turning*, my friend David Korten says that the only way to create this kind of a shift in worldview is to insinuate new stories into community consciousness. It's useful to recognize that the spark that ignited our heightened awareness of and concern for, the sustainability of our planet was a photo taken from Apollo ___ as it orbited the moon. It's

possible that in some small way stories about the surprising things that happen when the forces of creativity and destruction meet in places like Phnom Penh, Belfast, and Johannesburg could help to shift perceptions about the arts in our own back yards. They might even help change your own ideas about the power of art and culture. At the least they should help dispel the silly notion that what we do is an amusing extra, a frosting, a trivial pursuit only appropriate for leisure time or after school.

Finally, I think you would all agree that we live in time and place where our fellow citizens, our families, our communities and institutions are searching for a way to bring some kind of balance to a world that often seems out of kilter; a balance between the safe and the challenging, the material and the transcendent, tradition and modernity, opportunity and responsibility, chaos and order; a balanced future that honors and respects all of the community's stories; a balanced community that trusts itself to embrace the full range of these stories—the good and the bad, the settling and the unsettling.

I think these stories about artists making a difference in some of the worlds most out of kilter places can teach us something about using the creative process bring some balance to our own communities. In the end, I think that's what most of us are out there working for---communities that engage their artists to help weave a strong fabric out of the many stories to define our histories, our struggles , our values, our beliefs and our dreams.

Here is a final story that I think brings this home.

The last time we encountered the Watts Prophets they were young 70's era radical poets on the verge of making history as the voice of a community fed up with racism, police and fighting for social and economic justice.

Watts Prophets, Lincoln Nebraska, 2004

Now they are grandfather griots looking to touch the soul of a new generation dealing with many of the same struggles.

Lincoln's East High School is suburban and middle class. At North Star High, the majority of the students qualify for the subsidized lunch program. This distinction is the educational bureaucracy's way of identifying schools that serve poor neighborhoods. These differences have also precipitated a rivalry that at times has resembled an all out war that has visited violence on students from both schools. But, the real issues faced by both schools are indistinguishable: truancy, drugs, teen pregnancy and low graduation rates. This is familiar territory for the visiting Watts Prophets. They know these are good kids, with great potential, but, their job, growing up in twenty first century America, is a tough one.

The Prophets begin their two week residency in the suburbs at East. On their first day in the school they greet students as they file into the school's cavernous and frigid assembly hall theater. The Prophets introduce themselves poetically, trading syncopated, rhyming lines back and forth and finishing with their trademark shout out---“ The Watts Prophets are in the house!

By the time they finish the place has warmed considerably. The students are smiling and curious, ready for what's next. But the Prophets are not here just to entertain.

Richard turns to the students.

“Who are you? Tell us about yourself. What are you going to be?”

One student raises his hand. . Before he utters two sentences, Richard starts to coach. “Stand tall, now. Don't shuffle. Get your hands out of your pockets. Project your voice – you have a beautiful voice.” Otis asks, “Any poets in the room? Who wants to read a poem?”

*A young woman in dreads stands to read. Amde asks, How long you been working on those dreads? She shrugs and smiles and reads. The poem is untitled. They are lyrics, actually. A sophomore boy rises and shares another. The Prophets hover, the poems are raw, some scraps, some gems, but the grandfather griots hang on every word... encouraging, cajoling, coaching,.
With open hands
bright bronze*

*bathed in klieg
 slowly coaxing
 young soul supernovas
 out of the shadows
 gradually amplifying
 their strobing hearts
 re-fueling the signifying reactor
 at a feast
 of young poet shamans*

(An except from the song Art and Upheaval² is sung.)

*The poet stands in the streets of fire
 He knows his feet are going to burn
 But he speaks his mind
 Some people think
 You can't beat the devil with a song
 But they don't know.*

When everyone is finished, Amde turns to the group, "Do you all know why we are here?" No one answers. They are having fun. No one seems to care.

He answers his own question. "We are building a hip hop poetry choir." Richard finishes the thought. "The idea is for you to come up here on stage with what you have got to share. We will work on some stuff; some of you already have some material. In a couple of weeks, we are going to have a show at the Lied Center for Performing Arts at the University of Nebraska."

The workshops at North Star High School are scheduled for after school so the students have to come on their own time. After a while, Amde asks them to take out paper and pencil. He introduces 3 minute, "spontaneous" writing exercise. He says, "The subject is 'cold.' Just write

² ©William Cleveland, Clean Drinking Music, 2005

whatever comes into your head. Don't edit, don't stop writing. If you are stuck, write about being stuck."

After the requisite 180 seconds, Otis says, "Ok now, everybody reads. We are going to have 105% participation." He is cheerleading, exhorting, comforting---embracing. As each student comes forward, the three poets deliver one great hug of enthusiasm after another. Everyone is going to be a part of this hour-old community; even the one's who are lost at sea.

During a break in the workshop, Amde comes across a step team practicing in the hallway. After introducing himself, he convinces them to come in and check out the workshop.

The team clusters in the theater, wondering what the deal is. Amde invites them to step. They go into their routine. Stamping and clicking in syncopated rhythm. They are very good. They finish to applause and whistles. Amde turns to a young self-identified poet in the wings. "Can you work with that rhythm, can you make a poem for us to that beat." She nods yes. Then Amde turns back to the steppers.

"You know, the slaves used drums as their primary means of communication. The slave owners banned the drums because they feared them. They were the community's voice, but using them could get you hung. Without the drums, the slaves adapted and improvised, using their hands and feet and their bodies and utensils to keep the community's rhythm. When I was growing up we used to call it hambone."

In a matter of minutes, the step team has become a part of the journey to the main stage of the Lied Center. How it will all fit together remains to be seen, but the sense of community is infectious.

The workshops go on for the next two weeks. Each day, at both schools, the process continues, exhorting, challenging, coaching, building a momentum of belief -- A critical mass of standing straight, speaking clearly and turning up the volume.---surfacing the secret poets, musicians, dancers---generating a buzz that keeps the first day's students coming and spawns new recruits.

The Prophets are fomenting a coup of heightened expectations. Each day they make space for the students to assert their own power so they can join the revolution. About halfway through they bring the two casts together everyone is expecting trouble. But nothing happens.

On February 21, 2004 the 50 member Lincoln Hip Hop Poetry Choir makes its debut before a packed audience on the main stage of the Lied Center for Performing Arts. The evening is a collage of group and solo performances, interspersed with the Prophets doing some of their own pieces. Everything that happens over the course of the 90 minute show is original, created by the performers. And perform they do. Amazingly, when the lights hit the stage, lines and marks and cues are remembered. The last number has the whole cast doing a group poem about the choir and their work together. When it ends, the audience stands and claps for 10 minutes.

But as audience cheers and the curtain falls for the last time, everybody on stage knows that the real triumph has been the trip itself. Over the course of ten days they have been prodded and cajoled by these three old men into doing something inconceivable. They have taken a terrifying and exhilarating journey to make something new, and put it out there for everyone. Along the way, they have risked being open and vulnerable to each other. But, in the safe space provided by the Prophets they have supported each other through the stumbling that comes with creating. Looking back, some wonder why they weren't more afraid. Somehow, the grandfather poets had suspended the gravity of skepticism and self doubt just enough to allow their young imaginations to get a foothold. The momentum of belief and fun and ownership had taken them the rest of the way.

Some people think

You can't beat the devil with a song

But they don't know.

They don't know.

They don't know.