

IN PRAISE OF CONTEXT - MicroFest: Hawai`i and the Expansiveness of Ensemble Theater

by Jan Cohen-Cruz

At MOMA, treating tribal objects as art means excluding the original cultural context [which] ...we are firmly told at the exhibition's entrance, is the business of anthropologists. Cultural background is not essential to correct aesthetic appreciation and analysis: good art, the masterpiece, is universally recognizable. . . . Indeed, an ignorance of cultural context seems almost a precondition for artistic appreciation.

James Clifford,
The Predicament of Culture (1988) pg. 200

Sunrise and sunset performances, graffiti artists, pre-school children, stories of volcanoes and radical arts-based political action – the MicroFest: USA National Summit & Learning Exchange will lead you on a journey across the island of Oahu . . . bridging the local and national through performances and conversations that address the impact of art and artists in revitalizing communities.

[Network of Ensemble Theaters website](#)

The quotes above capture two contrasting philosophies of art's relationship to culture and community. The former sees context as a deterrent to savoring what makes art *art*—universal appeal, the individual genius as creator, time-and-place-lessness, and self-containedness. The latter quote and the focus of the Network of Ensemble Theater's (NET) June 2013 Microfest in Hawai`i, embraces art embedded in multiple contexts—spiritual, educational, political, and civic—rooted in collective expression, and reflective of specific times and places. In addition to theatrical productions, artistic skills are put to a range of

uses for the benefit of the community, understood as shared place, tradition, spirit, or circumstance.

NET is a membership organization of nearly 200 ensemble theater companies and a cohort of friends and allies. As NET proclaims in its online manifesto, some of its diverse member companies create original performance; others work



Sunrise welcome by *kumu hula* Vicky Takemine and her *halau*.
Photo: Michael Premo

interpretively or do adaptations. Some emphasize rootedness in a community, be it geographic, intellectual, aesthetic, or cultural; others consciously stand apart so as to critique and provoke. But they all have in common a shared decision-making process and a commitment to work together over extended periods of time. NET members gather through “MicroFests,” several day exchanges in different places around the U.S. that combine the sharing of work and learning labs. The most recent series happened in 2012-2013 in Detroit, Appalachia, New Orleans, and Oahu, all places with significant activity relevant to the questions underlying this MicroFest series: What does this kind of work—e.g., theater that impacts community beyond the production—look like? What makes the work *work*? How does place impact art, and art impact place?

The NET MicroFest in Hawai‘i encompassed some 150 NET constituents, family members, and allies, both local and from many corners of the U.S., who spent two and a half days in Honolulu at performances, workshops, discussions, and site visits, and two days at a National Summit & Learning Exchange in Oahu’s rural north. It was a non-prescriptive invitation to look at a range of ways that ensemble theaters interact with the places they are situated. As NET executive director Mark Valdez notes, ensembles do not necessarily focus beyond making performances, given those take so much effort already (2013). Other companies do embrace social and civic contexts as central to deepening and broadening their art. Some engage only when one or two company members spearhead such efforts. Still other ensembles practice such partnerships but do not foreground them.

MicroFest: Honolulu was an occasion for ensemble theater makers to acknowledge and reflect on such activities and their place in the field. In what follows I describe some of our experiences with theater engaged with place in Honolulu, muse on ways that the work of ensemble theater often extends beyond productions, and consider if ambivalences are around practices or the language identifying such work.

Attending MicroFest was a professional pleasure for me both as a someone who writes about arts integrated into social and political endeavors, and an integrative experience, having been a member of an ensemble company, the New York City Street Theater, in the early 1970s. Having made my professional life in colleges and universities, NET is my road not taken.

MICROFEST: HONOLULU AND THEATER’S PLACE

In contrast with theater festivals which are only concerned with aesthetics, MicroFest: Honolulu depended on additional criteria as well. Cultural continuity was sometimes more important than innovation, so often prized in aesthetic circles; and the discourse a performance generated was as significant as the performance itself. Site visits and performances were selected for their responsiveness to local issues and concerns that spill over purely artistic boundaries. Partners from community-based organizations, government, and business were as key as were other artists, evidencing what Pam Korza, co-director of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts and one of NET’s MicroFest partners, has called common ground, uncommon partners (2013).

MicroFest’s emphasis on artists’ work in addition to productions still manifests the [values of ensemble theater](#)—inclusion, transparency, excellence, respect, active engagement, and knowledge building. From the very first day of this gathering, at 4:30 a.m., as our groggy cohort of more than 100 participants excitedly boarded school buses bound for Oahu’s eastern shore for a sunrise ceremony, a ritual of thankfulness to nature, MicroFest manifested respect for the host culture. It foregrounded local culture bearers, and approached the gathering as an opportunity to build knowledge, in this case about indigenous performance. We were instructed to refrain from conversation for the duration of the ritual, and to open ourselves to hidden knowledge--if we saw birds fly overhead, what was their message to us?



Kumu hula Vicky Takemine. Photo: Pam Korza

Aesthetic excellence was evident in the care shown to every element of the ritual. *Kumu hula* Vicky Takemine and a group of Hawaiians led chants accompanied by the sound of a conch shell and traditional movements, with attention to clothing and mood, all of us in a circle by the ocean, learning how to clap our hands in a specific way as we faced east, almost cajoling the sun to rise above the clouds. This work was aesthetic in the sense of beauty and sensuousness and also as understood by scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as the form of value: “that form may or may not be beautiful; it may or may not be virtuosic; it may or may not be an exemplar of craft. But meaningful form and value for me are at the heart of what art is.” (421) And value, which is specific to different contexts, was of central importance.

Mindfulness around language ran through the full five days. It was present in the Hawaiian chant in the ritual as well as in subsequent activities naming possible social outcomes of

ensemble work in community. After the sun rose and we immersed ourselves in the ocean, NET facilitators Daniel Banks, Rachel Grossman, and Michael Rohd took us through participatory exercises to get a sense of who we as MicroFest participants were, to remind us of MicroFest’s goals, and to ground us in our own inquiry for the festival, drawing on the notion of theater’s multiple outcomes.



Ashley Sparks and Mark Valdez help lead opening exercise on art’s social impacts. Photo: Michael Premo

To further the generation and dispersal of knowledge, NET partnered with Animating Democracy. Looking at the range of work in the field, Animating Democracy has identified six areas of art’s *social* impact

beyond economic and aesthetic measures: knowledge, discourse, attitudes, action, capacity, and policy. The terms were offered up with some caution because they hadn't emerged from a group process. We explored aspects of our work in relationship to these impacts, thinking about which area we wanted to work on during this MicroFest, and assessing the value of the terms themselves. Acknowledging these terms as short-hand for larger topics and our limited time to unpack them, having a common vocabulary nonetheless reinforced the values of NET as a community.

Theater's contribution to multiple community outcomes was evident in the next MicroFest sessions. Participants chose from four local contextualizations of theater: food justice, *hula* and music, Hawaiian language, and nature and storytelling. I attended the session on Hawaiian language, taking place at a charter school dedicated to bringing back indigenous language and local cultural practices. The students had created a play that they performed for us in the Hawaiian language. In the process of making it, they learned the history of their school and more about Samuel M. Kamakau, the educator-historian for whom it is named. Intergenerational ties were strengthened through students interviewing elders, peer community was deepened through collaborating among themselves, individual



Students of the Ke Kula 'o Samuel M. Kamakau charter school. Photo: Pam Korza

capacity was enhanced by public speaking and self-presentation, and cultural identity was reinforced by incorporating a traditional story into the play. A group of University of Hawai'i/Manoa students performed traditional Hawaiian *mele* or songs played on indigenous instruments, one accompanied by a *hula*, all exuding abundant joy. They had grown up with no connection to indigenous culture, given the dominance of the U.S. mainland; learning and performing these songs, chants, and music was

deeply important to their sense of themselves.¹

The sessions on Day 2 concerned the relationship between art and social issues with which people in Honolulu and "the mainland" also struggle—immigration, community development, the environment, and homelessness. In most cases a NET company from elsewhere and a Hawaiian company both performed around that theme to make the trans-local link and open an exchange. The session I attended, Art and Neighborhood Development, included not a NET company but a director, Michael Rohd, who facilitated response to an excerpt of a play created by the Kumu Kahua Theatre based on stories gathered from changing neighborhoods and a tour of murals sprouting throughout a neighborhood.

The focus was the neighborhood of Kaka’ako. It was an unusual opportunity to visit a place on the brink of rapid growth, when interventions that could advance an equitable process are still possible. The tour featured several murals, galleries, artist spaces, and businesses. The murals are colorful and in some cases educational. One mural was captioned “Healthy people, healthy oceans, healthy land” and featured a 12-foot naked woman, her body ruptured open with traditional foods like octopus and taro pouring out; such foods barely accessible on the islands because they are so heavily exported. A young artist who has done a lot to make mural space available by approaching private building owners said that just getting spaces to work and bringing artists together was rare. He was most



Mural by 808 Urban youth. Photo: Michael Premo

interested in concentrating creative energy in one space, thus countering the argument that art in the street is a blight, not an asset. Teenagers were among the muralists thanks to [808 Urban](#), a local “collective of community cultural workers: artists, organizers and volunteers committed to improving the quality of life for our communities through arts programming.” One teenager testified to her personal growth through participating in their program, working with other youth from diverse geographic and economic backgrounds, learning to create murals, and becoming a spokesperson.

After the neighborhood tour, Michael Rohd, who brings collaborative theater making skills to communities shaping collective action from the ground up, led a process with some 50 NET participants and about 18 local stakeholders who had gathered to discuss the imminent change. This was in response to a request from 808 Urban.



Art & Neighborhood Development discussion in the Kaka’ako neighborhood. Photo: Michael Premo

Rohd had asked three NET participants to prepare brief observations and questions catalyzed by the tour. Trap Bonner, a filmmaker and community organizer from New Orleans, emphasized that the murals provide beautification of the neighborhood which adds value and lowers crime; opportunities for cross-pollination, and an incubator space for artists working in partnership with the city; and collaboration with other artists both locally and globally. Cultural consultant and small town mayor Kathie DeNobriga described the murals

as an explosion of energy. She emphasized questions the tour raised for her: How are stakeholders balancing this complex endeavor having to do with massive building? Are they getting and applying knowledge from people who currently live in the neighborhood and if so, how? What access to decision makers do current residents have? Given the nature of change and transition, how will they balance the “been-heres” with the “come-heres”? The third respondent, Marcus Renner--a playwright with an undergraduate degree and professional experience in environmental studies--wanted to see a map of the neighborhood and the redevelopment plan. He was struck by the rapid pace of change, and wondered why now. Who will be moving in? What will happen to the murals?

Rohd put us in pairs of one local and one outsider, to discuss what we’d seen and raise questions about art’s place in community development. Some NET participants cautioned that murals have been used as a marketing tactic to create an “art district” that makes an area more attractive to potential buyers, rather than more inclusive of artists. While no answers were expected, the questions from these dyads were collected for neighborhood people to consider as they continue to think through how they want to respond to changing circumstances. NET is providing a transcript of the session for their reflection and both Rohd and MicroFest Coordinator Ashley Sparks are continuing an exchange with them.



**Theater of the Sphere session by El Teatro Campesino.
Photo: Michael Premo**

their world view. It connects to body, intellect, spirit, and emotions and provides a basis for cross-sector partnerships given its sense of connectedness among all living things. Recognizing the link between particular aesthetics, places, and cultures reinforced the point that engaging with place and making art are not mutually exclusive.

The last two days of the gathering was a National Summit & Learning Exchange on Oahu’s rural North Shore, to reflect on the ramifications of the entire cycle of festivals exploring how ensemble theaters and the places they are situated influence each other. I turn now to two interrelated themes of these discussions, generating a common language and affirming a place for community-engagement in ensemble practice.

One feature of Day 3 was hands-on workshops, many of which emphasized the relationship between aesthetics and culture. Rather than stripping all particulars and “regionalisms” of the actor’s identity as in much western acting training, the approach I experienced—El Teatro Campesino’s Theatre of the Sphere—was deeply infused with cultural meaning. While begun in 1965 to culturally support striking Chicano farmworkers in California, El Teatro was soon exploring the Mayan cosmological root of their culture, which shapes their theater and

THE DREAM OF A COMMON LANGUAGE

*The drive
to connect. The dream of a common
language.*

From poet Adrienne Rich's "Dream of a Common Language" in which she integrates her identity as part of the LGBT community into her poetry

Being in Hawai'i, where the Native language has been pre-empted by English, makes issues around language very palpable. President of NET's board and a founding member of Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble (BTE) Laurie McCants was enthusiastic about theaters partnering with other community organizations and institutions. She gave beautiful and committed performances in BTE's previous season's *Flood Stories Too*, in conjunction with Bloomsburg University and some 60 townspeople, an initiative as much about healing the town of the trauma of massive destructive flooding as entertaining them. But she is not a fan of what she calls the "high-falutin' and academic sounding" phrase "cross-sector partnerships" that she sees as generated by foundations and the academy.

The issue of language came into focus at Microfest at a panel of funders sympathetic to cross-sector art. Several attendees took issue with the attention funders have been paying to "creative place making," through which "public, private, not-for-profit, and community sectors partner to strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, tribe, city, or region around arts and cultural activities." (Markusen and Gadwa 2010) There was ambivalence around the term "place making," as if places aren't also already made by those who live in them. Participants voiced an underlying tension: Who names work that is, in fact, spearheaded by artists and other people in those places? Paralleling issues raised earlier around the movement to bring back the Hawaiian language, musician Maurice Turner reflected on the close bond between culture and language: "As an African American, I think it's difficult to have hope of the restoration of our culture when I compare it to the restoration of the Hawaiian culture because, when we spoke our language, they cut our tongues out."

What role can (and do) private funders play in creative placemaking efforts?

Panelists: Carolyn Somers, Joan Mitchell Foundation; Lori Pourier, First People's Fund; John McGuirk, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation; Vicky Takemine, PA'I Foundation; Michelle Coffey, Lambent Foundation; Judi Jennings, Kentucky Foundation for Women; Maria Rosario Jackson, Kresge Foundation.

Photo: Michael Premo



Some NET members responded no better to the term “cross-sector work” that came up during the funders’ panel. A Teatro Campesino member said the word assumes that the various organizations in a community *are* sectors and/or “have been divided,” whereas Teatro Campesino looks at community as an interconnected ecosystem. To Carlton Turner, active NET member and executive director of Alternate ROOTS,² the phrase is one of exclusion: “The constant flow of new language to describe not so new practices gives a sense that those that are creating the new language are creating the practice and the language is used as a barrier or entry point for access to resources. If you know the language, then this world is open to you. If not, then you get left out or behind.” (Turner 2013) Moreover, he continued, “Alternate ROOTS and other small to mid-sized institutions get requests to support larger institutions in implementing practices in support of the adoption of the new language in lieu of supporting those organizations that have traditionally done the work to go to scale. They want to partner with us because they don’t know how to do it and can’t learn fast enough. You need to build relationships first and that takes years.”

Valdez agreed with Turner that many NET members do not have access to the forums where this language is being promoted. Valdez’s response is to introduce the terms at NET events where members *can* access them. Valdez intentionally brought certain terms into the discourse of MicroFest: Honolulu; terms he believes could serve ensemble theater makers depending on who they are talking with at particular moments. He observes that many of his ensemble colleagues hesitate to name things, with the result that “others name them for us, creating a Catch 22: unhappiness with the language that exists but unwillingness to offer alternatives.” (Valdez 2013)

Rather than cross-sector, the visual art world has embraced the term “social practice,” which critic Andy Horwitz defines as:

... artistic projects in various disciplines that emerge from engaging with social issues in community, that enlist “non-artists” in the creation and development of the project and have as a goal some kind of awareness-raising or sociological impact. This doesn’t preclude aesthetic considerations or the possibility for the realization of a singular artistic vision, but it implies a set of conditions that are outside of more traditional artistic practices. (2012)

This definition of art as social practice is very broad. For many practitioners, the notion of a higher calling that they are working towards across sectors, be it political or social, is fundamental; or art as social practice can just be about new terrain for artists.

Michael Rohd emphasizes the artist’s agency in projects he calls social practice:

... work initiated with an artist’s desire to explore/create a conceptual event or moment of their design. The design and/or execution may engage non-artists in any number of ways: it may leverage non-arts partners and community resources, it may intend to specifically impact the social or civic life of the context in which it occurs in

measurable ways, or it may intend to exist as an aesthetic interruption from which impact is to be derived in an open, interpretive manner. But alongside whatever social or civic needs the project addresses, the leading impulse and guiding origin energy is from the artist (2012).

Rohd contrasts social with “civic” practice: “activity where an artist employs the assets of his/her practice in response to the needs of a civic partner as determined through ongoing, relationship-based dialogue. A civic partner is an organization or institution that doesn’t have an arts-centered mission” (2013). The decision of what to make comes out of the relationship, not from the artist.

Rohd thus foregrounds who is driving a project.

The value of collaborations between the arts and other sectors is also manifested in initiatives including: the arts-based [Creative Time](#), higher education organizations including [Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life](#), examples of [neighborhood-based culture and community development](#), and an array of other initiatives including [experiments in cultural diplomacy](#). Cross-sector suggests people with different expertise collaborate so closely as to make something new in the process; as distinct from “multi-sector,” which suggests people from different areas of expertise going in the same direction but not being affected by each other.

Carlton Turner expressed a desire for more “organic” language, but was not sure what that would be. He has simply found that, while working on performance projects, something is often missing that is best provided by someone with other expertise, be it in areas like healthcare, the environment, or post-traumatic stress. Turner noted that Alternate ROOTS has had a major influence on his thinking about performances as cultural practice, with *culture* as a useful frame that is larger than *art* and one that better reflects the groups of people with whom he works.

WHERE DOES CROSS-SECTOR WORK FIT IN A THEATER COMPANY?

The idea of a cross-sector component of theater makes some artists uneasy, concerned that their peers and audiences will think they are less serious about art and more interested in what Laurie McCants (2013) calls “social work.” For people in parallel fields, the “icing on the cake” metaphor too often dominates understandings of the role of the arts in social endeavors, impeding fuller explorations of what art might bring.

Artists have multiple reasons for partnering with people outside of the arts. Ensemble companies make room for individual members to integrate their various passions into the work. When Jerry Stropnicki wanted to make theater with local people to help heal from the terrible flooding they experienced, Bloomsburg Theatre Ensemble, of which he is a founding member, was eager to make it happen.

Some theater makers resist cross-sector partnerships because they feel they are being asked to do something very different from practicing their craft. Yet many ensemble theater skills are potent assets in community and civic work. Rohd names some of these assets: the capacity to “design and lead a process where collaborative activity moves diverse stakeholders with varied self interests towards decision-making and shared investment; ... synthesize complex content into meaning that can be both articulated and interrogated; ... problem-solve.” An example is Sojourn Theater’s role with Catholic Charities USA “creating workshops and performances that bring clients, service providers, and policy makers into dialogue with each other.” (2013)



MicroFest Detroit Fellows Jessica Williams and Lisa Luevenos.
Photo: Michael Premo

One of NET’s initiatives to enhance cross-sector work is a Fellows Program to develop leadership among artists and their community collaborators. Two Fellows each from Detroit and Appalachia, three from New Orleans, and one from Hawai`i met numerous times over the year to discuss arts-driven cross-sector collaborations with leaders in these



MicroFest Hawai`i Fellow, Moses Goods. Photo: Michael Premo

practices and to build skills. Selected for their dynamism and engagement in their own communities and leadership potential in art and community development, the fellows are expected to bring the skills they develop back home through sharing best practices, leading a skills training workshop, or mentoring a community practitioner or organization. Such leaders can communicate the power of art to multiple sectors, locally and nationally.

Not all work across sectors is smooth. Ethnographer Dwight Conquergood received hostile responses to stories he told of Lao and Hmong people:

Fundamentalist Christians perceptively point out that by the very act of collecting, performing, and preserving these stories I am legitimizing them, offering them as worthy of contemplation for Christians, and encouraging the Lo and Hmong to hold fast to their “heathenism.” Welfare workers despise me for retarding the refugees’

assimilation into mainstream America and thereby making the caseworker’s job more difficult. . . . Some social workers and administrators clearly emphasize that videotaping ancient rituals, recording and performing oral histories are not morally neutral activities. Some public school educators interrogate me for performing in a respectful tone a Lao legend that explains the lunar eclipse as a frog in the sky who swallows the moon. . . . I’ve been faulted for not correcting the grammar and punctuation of the narrative texts I’ve collected and thus making the people “sound stupid and backward” (68-9).

These responses, Conquergood notes, speak to both cross-sector challenges and the moral implications of performing ethnographic or any first person material. I agree with Conquergood that there is a responsibility that comes from hearing or witnessing the lot of another person. We are obliged to put some energy into righting a wrong we thus learn about; knowledge is not something to store but upon which to act. Gathering people’s stories in the research process, some makers may feel the need to respond more directly to what they learn than the ensuing production allows. Artists may be compelled to partner with social justice organizations or lawyers or therapists who can address specific needs. One way or the other, more response is called for. Many of ensemble theater’s desired outcomes, including the aesthetic and economic, are advanced by cross-sector collaboration. By providing venues for artists and significant partners from other fields to come together, a discourse can be generated around social issues, action can be taken together, and policy change attempted.

THE POST-SHOW DISCUSSION

The post-show discussion is a common way that theaters engage beyond the performance. At the Summit, ArtSpot Productions of New Orleans performed its “trunk show” version of *Go Ye Therefore*, which is typically followed by a discussion and workshop neither of which were offered in Oahu. In *Go Ye*, two women—one black, one white—both daughters and grand-daughters of Baptist preachers—explore their personal journeys of faith and the troubled relationship between missionaries and “natives.” While sensitively performed by Kathy Randels and Rebecca Mwase, some NET participants were disturbed by particular moments, especially of white on black violence and resonance with the history of colonialism and missionary



Rebecca Mwase (left) and Kathy Randels (right) in *Go Ye Therefore* by ArtSpot Productions. Photo: Michael Premo

work in Hawai'i, and asked NET leadership if time could be made to discuss it, which they quickly did. The discussion was thoughtfully facilitated by Daniel Banks.

One of the moments that troubled viewers most was when Randels, playing a missionary, strangles Mwase, playing a Zimbabwean, with her skirt, and forces her to speak English. Randels elaborates: "She then also removes the native woman's headwrap and shirt, completely stripping her of her own clothing (culture)." ³ Randels mused, "I believe the sudden escalation to violence coming after some scenes that had been quite comical contributed to the audience feeling unprepared for such a moment."

It soon became clear that the problem was dramaturgical. The full-length play, Randels noted, has "more room to breathe between difficult scenes." The trunk version was constructed to be followed by what director Ashley Sparks calls "racial and spiritual healing work. It's not designed to stand alone." Choreographer Monique Moss concurred: "the goal has always been healing through the power of the art." Jeff Becker described his design of the full-length piece in a house from which, for example, at a particular moment, water flows out the windows like tears for what Randels' preacher father lost in Hurricane Katrina. He explained that the house functioned as a performer interacting with Randels and Mwase. The excerpt was missing that central character that helps tell the story with images instead of words. Notwithstanding, he was grateful to share *Go Ye Therefore* at MicroFest: "At the end of the day any good work of art is a doorway into a much larger story and conversation and it is our role to open that door so people are enticed and inspired to walk through." (*Go Ye*, 2013)

It was a compelling conversation and a good example of "discourse" as an important outcome of theater, as introduced on the beach during the first morning of MicroFest. All five artists agreed that they learned how carefully even excerpts of a piece must be shaped for an audience's experiences. Mwase avowed and her collaborators echoed:

The space made for the discussion was extremely valuable for me and I think also for the audience to voice their reactions, experiences, windows and mirrors into what the issues raised in the piece brought up for them. Part of the work for me is the discussions, the listening to where and how people interface with these histories and narratives of trauma (*Go Ye Therefore* 2013).

Such conversations also depend on inclusivity as regards race; it could not have happened so meaningfully with an all white group. In the terrible aftermath of the George Zimmerman acquittal, we need more opportunities to talk *about* race *across* race.

The shift in the actors' role from speakers to listeners, and the spectators from listeners to discussants, marks theater's extension beyond the performance. Any number of theater people have realized "the play" is *not* for them "the thing." Emily Nash, who founded Creative Alternatives of New York, which provides workshops for people in fragile circumstances, told me that it was the workshop process she loved about theater, whether or not the work was brought to production. It's exciting aesthetically to realize how integral

such conversations are to certain theatrical experiences, and to treat them, even in excerpted form, as integral.

Perhaps it is such aesthetic ramifications of community-engaged work that will win the day. Taking responsibility to name ensemble theater practices beyond productions is an opportunity to claim such work not as service or an adjunct to the important work of making theater, but as an equally significant cultural activity. Have no doubt that such work will be named by someone.

EMERGENCE: FROM NETWORKS TO COMMUNITIES TO SYSTEMS

NET leadership strengthens community engagement as a component of theater both by acknowledging its value among ensemble companies and their immediate communities, and through alliances with other theater organizations. This suggests a theory of change akin to what Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze call the "[Lifecycle of Emergence](#)."⁴ Charting the move from networks to communities of practitioners to systems of influence, they ask: "What makes a flock of birds or a school of fish suddenly change direction? What seemingly unconnected individual actions led to the end of the Soviet empire or the fall of the Berlin Wall? The world doesn't change one person at a time. It changes as networks and relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and a vision of what's possible." What impact might NET as a community of practice have on the larger theater field to expand broad understanding of what theater can do?

Early NET members Jerry Stropnick and McCants note that 15 years ago, Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national service organization for U.S. not-for-profit



Photo: Michael Premo

theater (composed of nearly 500 theater companies compared to NET's 200), did not much acknowledge the work of ensemble theaters. Its purview was theaters with largely fixed hierarchies of job responsibilities such as director, designer, actor, manager, and playwright. The decision to start NET

was for some, simply to

and community life, such as engaging other “sectors” including education, healthcare, and the environment.

McCants explains that ensemble theater members very strategically organized themselves, using Wheatley’s terms, as a “community of practice” seeking to become a “system of influence” at TCG conferences. They made sure that every time there was an open mic, one of them would get up and comment or question in such a way as to direct attention to themselves as ensemble artists—“just so that the word ‘ensemble’ would get out there. And it worked,” McCants avowed. A change began under Ben Cameron’s directorship of TCG, enlarging the tent of who are considered theater makers, resulting, McCants notes, in the situation now that “ensemble is viewed as a viable way to do theater, and it’s actually on check-lists on grant applications.” (2013) McCants also points to the increase in articles about ensembles in TCG’s magazine, *American Theatre*. Further reflecting NET’s growing influence, McCants was invited to speak at the 2013 TCG national conference’s general assembly rather than at a much smaller break-out session. “In the TCG world,” she affirms, “ensembles have moved from the margins to the main stage.” In 2013, over 40 theaters were members of both NET and TCG.

Valuing diversity in theater may also be on the rise. In 2008, under new director Teresa Eyring, TCG launched The Young Leaders of Color Program “to gather groups of young theatre professionals of color from around the U.S. at TCG’s national conferences to engage in a dialogue about the new generation of leadership.” This corresponded to a slightly earlier move, supported by progressive funders such as Roberta Uno at The Ford Foundation, to integrate ensemble leaders of color into NET.

Are ensemble theaters expanding in numbers and is their influence growing? Valdez thinks yes:

There’s something about inclusive lateral structures of ensembles now as we come out of an era with such an emphasis on the individual and hierarchies, resulting in so much disempowerment. Perhaps the pendulum just had to swing. Collaboratively created work that tries to be transparent, values respect for all participants, and is committed to multiple perspectives and expertise responds to a very real hunger felt by artists and their audiences. (2013)

Valdez also recognizes an economic aspect to the appeal of ensembles at this moment: “Large institutional theaters leave you waiting for someone to offer you a job. Ensembles come together to create and are self-generative, making their own opportunities.” Economics also impacts aesthetics. Valdez goes on to say:

Institutional theaters are increasingly generalists, their purpose to serve as broad a constituency as they can, to bring in the largest possible audience. Jobbing in actors, they don’t reflect the particulars of the place they are situated in and collective work over time. They are almost compelled to be anaesthetic, without an aesthetic or point of view. They may produce wonderful plays that express the *writers’* points of view but

they are unlikely to include multiple perspectives. You can see the very same play at multiple regional theaters, sometimes literally, when they are doing co-productions.

Ensemble is a remedy to that. You can't underestimate the aspect of democracy and empowerment. Ensemble aesthetics are specific. Each ensemble member has a voice, a stake in it, a say. Whether devising or making existing work, ensembles are owned by the collective. That larger desire nationally, to want to be involved and participate, plays heavily into why ensembles are so visible now.

We may also be witnessing the recognition of community engagement practices as theatrical territory through the dissemination of the work of companies and entities like the Network of Ensemble Theaters. As art historian Grant Kester points out, community engaged or dialogic art generally encompasses the interaction among artists and diverse other people in a particular social context. (2004) As the field continues to wrestle with terms and practice, the essential question remains: How can the significant ways that artists interact with others in different spheres of endeavor be embraced, made more visible, and brought to scale so as to integrate such robust creative contributions more fully into social life?



Jan Cohen-Cruz co-facilitated a theatre workshop at Trenton State Prison as part of the NYC Street Theatre (1971-72). She brought Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) founder Augusto Boal to the U.S. (early 1980s) and remains a TO practitioner. She received her PhD from New York University (NYU) Performance Studies and trained professionally with Lee Strasberg and Kristin Linklater. Cohen-Cruz wrote *Engaging Performance: Theatre as Call and Response; Local Acts: Community-Based Performance in the U.S.*; edited *Radical Street Performance*; and with Mady Schutzman, co-edited *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism and A Boal Companion*. Jan taught at NYU Tisch School of the Arts (1984-2006), developing the minor in applied theatre and helping shape Tisch's art and public policy initiative. She produced a community-based arts project on community gardens directed by Cornerstone Theater's Sabrina Peck and another on gentrification, co-directed by Urban Bush Woman's Jawole Zollar and NYU's Rosemary Quinn. In 2006-07, Jan co-initiated *HOME, New Orleans*, a cross-sector collaboration exploring art's role in post-Katrina recovery.

From 2007-2012, Jan directed *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*. Jan is a University Professor at Syracuse University and editor of its e-journal *Public: A Journal of Imagining America*. In 2012, Jan received the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's Leadership Award in Community-Based Theatre and Civic Engagement.

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END NOTES

¹ The power of culture to support a sense of self and identity among people lacking the capacity to resist U.S. economic domination resonated with many NET participants, such as Appalachians where much of the land is controlled by multinational corporations. U.S. annexation of Hawai'i was resisted by many indigenous people. An excerpt of one account published in *The Orange County Register* begins, "Poka Laenui [director of the Institute for the Advancement of Hawaiian Affairs] pledges his allegiance to the sovereign nation of Hawai'i, not to the United States government." Missionaries to the islands beginning in 1820 became sugar planters and politicians whose powers soon eclipsed that of Hawai'i's ruling monarchy. The planters wanted Hawai'i to become part of the U.S., their major market, to avoid paying tariffs. The U.S. minister to Hawai'i, John L. Stevens, brought U.S. Marines to Honolulu to stage a coup, after which Stevens gave sovereignty to the mostly American planters who supported it. President Cleveland fired Stevens and apologized to the Hawaiian queen, who had resigned to avoid bloodshed. But the next president, McKinley, recognized the authority of the annexation and so it stood. (Sforza 1996)

² Alternate Roots describes itself as "a national resource to artists, organizers and cultural workers." See www.alternateroots.org.

³ Thanks to Jerry Stropnick, who cited this work in his essay on MicroFest: Detroit, "A Community of Practice: NET Learning in Place" (www.ensembletheatre.net).