

community musicworks

The World You Want to Live In: New Paradigms for the Arts

Lucy Caplan
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Community MusicWorks

Community MusicWorks (CMW) is a community-based organization that uses music education and performance as a vehicle to build lasting and meaningful relationships between children, families and professional musicians.

Founded in 1997 by Sebastian Ruth with start-up funding from the Swearer Center at Brown University, the program began with just fifteen students. Today, CMW is a thriving organization with thirteen resident musicians and more than 125 students. Resident musicians teach instrument lessons in violin, viola and cello, mentor students, organize events, and perform in a robust concert series throughout Providence and the surrounding communities. CMW receives strong ongoing support from Providence communities, from private philanthropy, and from national funders.

Community MusicWorks is a living experiment in putting the work of musicians into the role of benefitting the lives of young people, communities, and our society. Part of this experiment has involved periodic convenings of practitioners and philosophers since 2000 to improve our practices and contribute to a national conversation about the connection between arts practice and civic life.

www.communitymusicworks.org

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—Sebastian Ruth, *CMW Founder & Artistic Director*

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Brown University Arts Initiative The Brown Arts Initiative (BAI) seeks to cultivate creative expression and foster an interdisciplinary environment where faculty and students learn from each other, and from artists and scholars in a wide range of fields from across the campus and around the world. Taking full advantage of the University's open curriculum, the BAI builds on Brown's reputation as a destination for arts exploration, contributing to cultural enterprise through the integration of theory and practice, with an emphasis on innovation and discovery that results from rigorous artmaking and experimentation.

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PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

What is the significance of artistic experience in making a more just world?

What role can artists play in transforming their communities?

What social, historical, and ethical issues arise when we consider artists as agents of change?

On February 26, 2016, a group of artists, activists, scholars, and community members gathered at Brown University's Granoff Center for the Arts for a daylong symposium on "Art and Social Action: New Paradigms and Practices" that delved into these questions by way of presentations, conversations, and performances. The participants were an eclectic group, comprised of violinists and historians, composers and consultants, university administrators and new-music experimentalists. But they shared a commitment to thinking critically and carefully about the arts, and to tackling these vital and substantive questions.

While the symposium featured diverse perspectives, it built upon a common wellspring of ideas about the relationship between art and social action. Its guiding conviction – that the arts have profound social meaning and can therefore engender social change – has deep roots in the work of philosophers including John Dewey and Maxine Greene. Greene herself, in fact, was a key participant in three previous conferences organized by Community MusicWorks around similar themes, "Transformative Teaching in the Arts," (2000) "[Imagining Art and Social Change](#)," (2008) and "[Music and Civil Society](#)" (2011). As Sebastian Ruth noted in his opening remarks, this event thus represented part of an unfolding conversation, a contribution to a set of ideas already in the making. Yet if "Art and Social Action: New Paradigms and Practices" was a moment to build upon these predecessors, it was also, as its name suggests, an effort to generate something new. Throughout the day,



a number of ideas tended to recur within individual presentations, in conversations among panelists, and in the questions and contributions of members of the audience. These ideas, which resonate deeply with the priorities that have guided years of work at many of the organizations represented at the symposium, represent the culmination of a sustained effort to rethink the relationship between art and social action. Once atypical, but gradually becoming more and more essential, such ideas might be thought of as *new paradigms*: sets of beliefs, priorities, and values shared by members of a community. What makes them new is their emerging status as paradigms – foundational claims, not optional considerations – in thinking about the relationship between art and social action.

The first of these paradigms highlights **the centrality of place** in the way we think about the relationship between art and social action.



The second emphasizes **participation, politics, and power**, particularly in asking how aesthetic participation is connected with democratic citizenship. The third takes up the vexed but essential issue of **confronting tradition to create change**, or how attempts to use the arts to effect social action must reckon with the past as they endeavor to build a different future. Each builds upon historical precedents, and each informs the work and practices of contemporary artists. Each is capacious enough to make room for dissent, and indeed symposium participants sometimes disagreed regarding the paradigms' significance. Taken together, though, these sets of ideas transcend particular circumstances and points of divergence, ultimately underscoring a collective sense of goals and priorities. This essay offers a reflection on these three paradigms. While alluding to several specific examples, this essay does not attempt to be an exhaustive summary of all contributions made during the day. Instead, it highlights the thematic connections that emerged, implicitly and explic-

itly, throughout the symposium. In the spirit of combining theory and practice that was central to Maxine Greene's work – and is central to the work of many of the symposium participants as well – each paradigm is considered in terms of the theoretical and philosophical context it engages, how it developed over the course of the event, and how different participants contributed to its formation.

In his remarks as part of the opening panel, Adam Horowitz quoted the hopeful vision of artist, scholar, and social activist Bernice Johnson Reagon: "When you begin to imagine and act as if you live in the world you want to live in, you will have company." These three paradigms, created through the collaborative efforts of symposium participants, serve as a starting point for just such imagination and action. They offer a blueprint for thinking about the work of artists in the twenty-first century in a world that remains open to, and urgently in need of, transformation and change.

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Bernice Johnson Reagon



PART TWO

THE CENTRALITY OF PLACE

In *Art as Experience* (1934), the philosopher John Dewey lamented what he called “the museum conception of art,” or the confinement of the arts to exclusive institutional spaces.

Set apart from the goings-on of everyday life, works of art suffered: they were perceived as unrelated to the world around them and thus irrelevant to ordinary life.

For those working in the field of classical music, an analogue might be the “concert hall conception of music,” or the once-intractable belief that classical music takes place in rarefied venues and is available only to those who purchase expensive tickets. In his aesthetic philosophy, Dewey combated such ideas by emphasizing art’s experiential qualities. His aim was “to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.” Unlike works of art, sequestered in the museum, aesthetic *experience* transcends spatial constraints to reach ordinary locales: Dewey named the backyard garden, the mechanic’s garage, and the baseball diamond as equally legitimate spaces for the creation of aesthetic meaning.

To Dewey, a central problem with the museum conception was that it stymied art’s social potential. By drawing attention to art’s experiential qualities, he intended to show that art could be put to beneficial social ends. Aesthetic experience, he wrote, “effect[s] a broadening and deepening of our own experience, rendering it less local and provincial...Works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own.” To the extent that it prompted new ways of imagining oneself in relation to others, art was thus “more moral than moralities.” Moral precepts tended to act as “reflections of custom, reinforcements of the established order.” In contrast, art “has

been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit.” **In short, to limit the places in which art could be accessed was, ultimately, to limit our ability to reap its social and moral benefits, to refuse the possibility that art might serve as a spur to moral imagination and as a catalyst to imagining a better future.**

Like Dewey, an array of symposium participants eschew the “concert hall conception” in favor of a broader understanding of where classical music takes place and who creates it. If the existing paradigm defines the concert hall as classical music’s normal and expected setting, a new paradigm, collectively articulated by participants including Karen Zorn, Chloe Kline, and Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar, challenges that idea. Beyond simply expanding the possible terrain of classical music, though, this new paradigm recognizes that place is itself central to music’s meaning. **Rather than assuming a one-directional relationship in which music is “brought” to communities, like a physical object, it recognizes that the effects are mutual: the music and the setting shape one another in a continuous and multifaceted process of change.** Whether the music is being played in a taquería, a classroom, or a traditional concert hall – all settings mentioned over the course of the day – place matters. As Jamie Bennett of ArtPlace America noted in a recent interview, “community shapes art and art shapes community.”

Many discussions of place occurred during the aptly named panel on “Placemaking and Citymaking: Art Meets Street,” but speakers highlighted the topic in various other conversations as well. During the day’s second panel, Karen Zorn, president of the Longy School of Music, spoke about the role of place in the experience of music education students in [Longy’s M.A.T. program](#). Zorn explained that the program exemplifies Longy’s mission: unlike traditional conservatory programs, which focus on elite training in the performance of classical music, the school’s primary goal is “preparing musicians to make a difference in the world.” Offered in partnership with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the M.A.T. program combines graduate coursework in pedagogy with intensive teaching experience at local public schools and at the Youth Orchestra Los Angeles (YOLA). Because the program is housed in the same space as YOLA, students can literally and figuratively move between theoretical and practical aspects of the program: they might learn about a pedagogical theory in one classroom, walk across the hall to try it out, and then analyze its success with other members of their cohort. Place informs both sets of students’ understanding of the context in which they work and their approach to the music itself. While taking part in the program, M.A.T. students live in the same communities that their own students call home, many of which are located in the Rampart neighborhood of Los Angeles. This “immersion” aspect, as Zorn described it, allows them to better understand the social factors that shape YOLA students’ day-to-day lives, which might



include a high risk of crime, food insecurity, and other challenges. The experience also raises questions about issues of power and identity as they relate to pedagogy: for instance, how does M.A.T. students’ status as conservatory-trained musicians, often of a different socioeconomic and/or racial background than the YOLA students, affect classroom dynamics? Through serious engagement with place and context, M.A.T. students move beyond a narrow focus on imparting technical skills on a musical instrument, and develop their pedagogy using a broad array of tools and concepts.

Expanded pedagogical tools in hand, M.A.T. students rethink their approach to the music itself. Zorn gave the example of how M.A.T. students introduced art song to eighth graders. Rather than defining art song exclusively in terms of its status within the Western classical canon, M.A.T. students asked eighth graders to share music they knew and enjoyed, then pointed out thematic parallels between the music their students

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brought to the table and the new repertoire they sought to introduce. This exercise highlighted art song's connection to students' existing aesthetic experiences in an effort to, as Dewey might put it, "restore continuity": it broadened students' musical knowledge by drawing connections between their previous experience and a musical form new to them, potentially transforming the way they listen to both.

In her presentation during the "Placemaking and Citymaking" panel, Chloe Kline, Education Director at [Community MusicWorks](#), focused on a program that considers music and place through another lens: the connection between musical *performance* and neighborhood change. Kline began by noting that "place is central to our work, and has been from the beginning": like the Longy M.A.T. students, musicians at Community MusicWorks have long offered opportunities for music education within the context of a neighborhood. In recent months, CMW musicians have also explored the question of how performance might impact a place through a concert series at La Lupita, a taquería in the Olneyville neighborhood of Providence. Already a popular gathering spot, La Lupita represented an existing community strength and thus an ideal venue to explore the difference music could make in a community. **The concert series was an opportunity to ask several overlapping questions: can concerts thoughtfully designed around community strengths change perceptions and assumptions around a specific neighborhood? Can they break down barriers to mobility within or across neighborhoods?**

Can they increase utilization of neighborhood services, like restaurants and health centers? Can they spark a greater sense of engagement with the neighborhood among residents and non-residents? And, perhaps most importantly, can they bring together different populations to create a stronger sense of social cohesion? Surveys and interviews with concertgoers indicated that the series had been a success, at least in the short term: attendees described a sense of connection to others in the room, to the music, and to an atmosphere of attentive listening. Yet by asking questions that stressed the long-term health and vitality of the neighborhood, Kline emphasized that the objective of the concerts was not simply to effect a temporary transformation of the space, only to have that sense of togetherness dissipate as soon as the event was over. She focused on the lasting impact of music, a concept of the art form's potential which moves beyond its capacity to bring people together for an intense yet ephemeral aesthetic experience.

If Zorn and Kline offered broadly parallel ideas about how place and music intersect, Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar offered an alternative perspective. Abboud-Ashkar, who also spoke on the "Placemaking and Citymaking" panel, is the co-founder and artistic director of the [Polyphony Foundation](#) in Nazareth, which brings together young Arab and Jewish musicians to study and perform Western classical music. Because these students have virtually no other opportunity to interact with one another, musical or otherwise, the foundation must establish

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Can they spark a greater sense of engagement with the neighborhood among residents and non-residents?

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a gathering space of its own – a challenging endeavor, given the political context. The major innovation of his work, Abboud-Ashkar emphasized, is the creation of this intercultural space. Unlike other symposium participants, however, Abboud-Ashkar was skeptical of the idea that place and context transform the experience of the music itself, particularly when that music doesn't contain overtly political content. When asked by a member of the audience to explain the choice of Western classical music, given that this repertoire has little connection to his students' own backgrounds and heritage, he responded that, from his perspective, "Arabs and Jews playing Mozart is already political." He questioned the idea that a different choice of repertoire would change the program's political significance: "You cannot play a Mozart piece that will sound like it's a forced democracy and play it in a different way that is anti-democracy."

Abboud-Ashkar insists that that the political content of his work lies in the creation of a context for music-making, and precedes the moment of musical experience: once musicians lift their instruments and begin to play, the focus should be on Mozart. "Regardless of any social agenda that music can impact and influence, the minute the musicians are on stage...the experience is 100% about the music," he stated. "Once it becomes about something else, it loses a lot of its content."

The contrasting views raised in these presentations speak to longstanding debates in arts education. One of these debates, as Sebastian Ruth noted in his introductory remarks, asks about the relative importance of content and context. **Does art become socially meaningful only when it contains directly social or political content, as in the case of protest song?**

Or is the situational context in which it's created – where it happens, who is involved, and so on – more significant? Thinking about content and context as mutually influential muddies the distinction: a protest song, for instance, might mean something different at a political rally than it does in a recording studio. Performing a sonata in, say, a neighborhood park transports the sonata into a new setting; the new setting might also change the meaning of the music. Abboud-Ashkar's comments raise another important, related possibility by insisting that art is not bound to the social structure in which it is created. His ideas echo the work of philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who argued that art's transformative potential is not tied directly to its

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—
Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar



evocation of social issues, but rather stems from its aesthetic autonomy. Because art creates a critical space that is not governed by dominant social values, it allows for the questioning of those values. While these various ideas are not totally compatible, each in its own way accounts for the centrality of place in thinking about the creation of aesthetic meaning.

In her keynote address at Community MusicWorks' 2008 "Imagining Art and Social Change" conference, Maxine Greene spoke eloquently about what happens to a place when art enters it: **"when you read a poem or look at a work of art or listen to a piece of music...the ordinary world becomes de-familiarized," she noted. "It's not the old familiar living room, it's transformed into something, with windows opening that were never opened before."** What comes after this change in perception?

What new memories does it create, and what further action does it inspire? The collective sense among symposium participants seemed to be that the de-familiarization of a space, the opening of those windows, must serve as a starting point for asking questions about the long-term impact that begins with an ephemeral moment of aesthetic experience. As Stefano Bloch put it, the role of art might be "contributing to that unfinished product that communities are" by transforming the unfinished moment of aesthetic experience into something lasting that changes the neighborhood for the better.

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—
Maxine Greene



PART THREE

PARTICIPATION, POLITICS, AND POWER

What does it mean to participate in the arts, what does it mean to participate in a democracy, and how are the two connected?

Are the benefits of the arts primarily individual or social?

Does cultural change catalyze political change, or vice versa?

Do artists have an obligation to think of their work in political terms?

How does power shape individuals' access to and experience with the arts?

Does aesthetic participation make us better citizens?

How can we know?

Enormously complex and wide-ranging in scope, these questions indicate the depth and diversity of thought that catalyze the symposium's second paradigm. If the first paradigm emphasized the mutually transformative relationship between art and the context in which it occurs, the second asks how aesthetic experience intersects with other facets of social and political life.

During the opening panel, Sebastian Ruth defined "social action," a key term in the symposium's name, as "an intentional activity through which a group of people seek a more just society." Consequently, issues of participation, politics, and power take center stage: who holds power, who has access to the arts, and how the arts can influence the political landscape and alter the balance of power in a society. As one member of the audience commented near the end of the event, "I feel like we've been dancing around power all day." He was correct: **the theme of power, while not often explicitly stated, pervaded conversations from start to finish**, and was especially notable in presentations by Heidi Upton, Adam Horowitz, and Prentice Onayemi. While the idea that art *might* serve as that intentional activity is certainly not new, this new paradigm suggests that it *must*. In other words, aesthetic experience and social action exist in a reciprocal relationship, deeply meaningful to each other's very existence.

During the first panel of the day, "Aesthetic Experience and Social Imagination: The Legacy of Maxine Greene," Heidi Upton offered an example drawn from her work at St. John's

University, where she teaches "[Discover New York](#)," a course for first-year college students. In the course, which focuses on the issue of homelessness in the city, students use aesthetic experience as a pathway to sustained engagement with an urgent social problem. The course, Upton explained, offers an "enabling structure" through which students can notice the self, connect with others, and connect their experience to the social sphere. It begins with a series of exercises that ask students to notice the world around them on aesthetic terms. This might be as simple as thinking about the aesthetics of a room you're in; gradually, it leads to more complex questions that relate to the subject matter of homelessness. What do we see and not see in a photograph of a homeless woman? If you had to leave home today, what would you take? How would you carry it?

Aesthetic experience sets the stage for social participation: as Upton put it, "metaphor becomes a tool of analysis and interpretation." Having first considered the problem of homelessness through the prism of aesthetic experience, students then address it directly. In partnership with homeless service organizations across the city, they embark on collaborative aesthetic productions: for instance, in a project at the Mainchance Drop-In Shelter, students and homeless clients worked together to create a variety of artworks, including photographs, short stories, and theater productions. Art, having initially served as the motive for social engagement, becomes part of the outcome as well.

Upton's pedagogy of aesthetic education is deeply informed by the work of Maxine Greene. Greene believed that aesthetic experience encompasses two interconnected types of participation. First, it demands that one participate actively in the moment of aesthetic experience: "Aesthetic experiences require conscious participation in a work, a going out of energy, an ability to notice what is there to be noticed in the play, the poem, the quartet," she wrote in the 1995 essay collection *Releasing the Imagination*. Second, aesthetic experience facilitates an understanding of oneself as a social being with a consequential role to play in the world. "Participatory involvement with the many forms of art," Greene went on, "can enable us to see more in our experience, to *hear* more on normally unheard frequencies, to *become conscious* of what daily routines have obscured, what habit and convention have suppressed." By jolting us out of our habits, art disrupts apathy and motivates a reconsideration of oneself in relation to others. "The world that the arts illumine," Greene wrote, "is a shared world."

Like Dewey, who considered aesthetic experience "more moral than moralities," Greene believed aesthetic experience was as a necessary precursor to social change. Only through imagination and participation could one learn how to interact with, and eventually change, a world shared with others. When art failed to allow for such experience, it was "separated from the mass of people...by the distance created by commodification, by esotericism, by false claims of realism, by artificial mystifications



that excluded women, people of color, and the poor." Closing that distance involves the active participation in aesthetic experience that can shock us out of our own complacency with the status quo. But it also requires an inclusive and equitable concept of who gets to make art, and who gets to use art to reveal the stories of those who are socially disempowered and have historically been excluded from artistic canons. Artistic participation thus becomes a vital avenue toward social participation and, ultimately, toward the righting of power imbalances wrongly determined by factors like race, class, and gender. **So it is through the arts that we might ask the questions that those in power seek to silence; it is through the arts that we might imagine the world "as if it could be otherwise."**

"When art is fully embedded in the fabric of society, what does that look like, and how do we get there?"

—
USDAC

Imagination was also at the heart of Adam Horowitz's remarks, during the day's introductory panel, about the [U.S. Department of Arts and Culture](#) (USDAC). No, this is not a federal agency you've somehow never heard of; it is a "grassroots action network of artists and others committed to cultivating empathy, equity, and social imagination." The group is driven entirely by the participation of "citizen artists" who believe in the arts as a catalyst for social transformation, and is rooted in local participation and the work of "cultural agents" who are passionate about the role of art in community development. Only two years old, the USDAC has already drawn more than ten thousand participants to the artistic events it sponsors across the country, including story circles, a poetic "people's state of the union," and "arts-infused civic dialogues" called Imaginings. These events speak to one of the organization's key questions: "When art is fully embedded in the fabric of society, what does that look like, and how do we get there?" In an attempt to answer that question, the USDAC also works to develop local, state, and federal policy that expands support for the arts. The group is itself, Horowitz noted, "a large scale performance." Through its name, it playfully inverts the idea that cultural policy is a top-down endeavor, instead demonstrating that it needs to be rooted in the work of local artists and engaged citizens. Even more significantly, through its goal of developing substantive arts-centric policy, it asserts that art deserves to move "from the margins to the center" of public life.

Like Horowitz, Prentice Onayemi called for a fundamental redefinition of the relationship between art and civil society. Speaking on the "Placemaking and Citymaking" panel, Onayemi, who is the Director of Partnerships and Communications at [ArtPlace America](#), argued that the arts constitute a needed investment with the context of community development. **Thinking of the arts simply as potentially beneficial to a community is not enough: the arts "strengthen the fabric of a community," and thus deserve to be considered on par with other public sectors like transportation, housing, and public health.** Moreover, because the arts *contribute* to those other sectors, they deserve a seat at the table in conversations about community development and merit a similar intentional investment. "How can we shift normative expectations," Onayemi asked, "so that arts and culture is expected to be at that table?"

ArtPlace America's National Creative Placemaking Fund offers grants – 227 thus far – to community-based projects, and the organization also funds long-term community development investments, research, and field building. In each context, the goal is to demonstrate that the arts contribute to various sectors of civic life and generate concrete positive outcomes. Onayemi noted that while the arts are often assumed to serve a "bridging and bonding" function, acting as a sort of social glue that brings people together, social cohesion need not be an end in and of itself. The arts also promote more tangible benefits: he gave the example of the Ballot Box Project, based in the Collinwood

"A social action is an intentional activity through which a group of people seek a more just society."

—
Sebastian Ruth



neighborhood of Cleveland, in which community members not only engaged in participatory budgeting to determine how an ArtPlace grant would be spent, but also used the performances and installations made possible by the grant to encourage voter registration in advance of the 2016 elections.

It was perhaps appropriate that discussions of participation and political engagements sparked especially vocal debates among both panelists and members of the audience. For instance, one member of the audience noted during the “Placemaking and Citymaking” panel that the introduction of new cultural institutions into an urban space is often linked with gentrification. Does bringing art in mean pushing something or someone else out? Do cultural institutions run the risk of disempowering or disenfranchising members of the community they intend to serve?

Stefano Bloch, the moderator of the panel and a postdoctoral fellow in urban studies at Brown University, acknowledged the vital importance of this point, especially “for those people who see themselves, wrongly or rightly, as being displaced by new forms of cultural production coming into their neighborhood.” Yet Bloch hastened to note that such displacement is not an “inevitable outcome” – a perspective echoed by Onayemi, who called for a more nuanced understanding of what gentrification and displacement mean in the context of cultural change.

A second question, raised initially by Bloch and echoed by members of the audience, asked whether artists have an obligation to think of themselves or their work as political. Can artists choose not to be political, or to deny the political significance of their art? Who gets to decide what is and isn’t political about art? What do we even mean by “political”? Bloch urged audience members to think about this question by defining politics expansively, considering its meaning beyond formal processes like voting and legislation in order to understand the varied ways that art might affect it. Prentice Onayemi reiterated this idea, pointing out that in fact, artists are often uniquely suited to analyze political challenges: “what we have found is that [artists] have a tremendous ability to grasp the multiple truths of some of the most vexing issues within communities in a way that many other people simply don’t.” But these panelists also acknowledged the complexity of the issue. Bloch shared an anecdote about his aunt, a longtime clarinetist in the Los Angeles Philharmonic, who toured internation-

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ally with the orchestra to politically contentious areas yet chose to define her work as “just about the music.” And regardless of whether artists consider their work political, Onayemi noted, perhaps the focus should be on other stakeholders: it’s often administrators who need to be convinced that artists have something of value to add to a politically engaged effort.

As the vibrancy of these conversations indicates, this paradigm raises rich issues that can be approached from varying perspectives, and often sparked debate or even disagreement among participants. Yet perhaps more significant than the particulars of any one disagreement is the fact that these conversations are happening at all. It has often been necessary to disprove

the assumption that only some types of art are suited to political action, or that art is by and large apolitical. In contrast, the discussions generated by this paradigm operate on the baseline premise that art is participatory, political, and interwoven with power. **We might even go so far as to say that genuinely visionary or transformative aesthetic experience, because of its political nature, ultimately will work toward social action.**



PART FOUR

CONFRONTING TRADITION TO CREATE CHANGE

“Why classical music?”

This question, asked by a member of the audience toward the end of the symposium, is more complicated than it first appears. Because classical music, like all art forms, carries social connotations and has a complex legacy, the question of why it should be used as a means for social action is an essential one. As Sebastian Ruth pointed out during the first panel, the art form has a widely known “origin story” that runs counter to the goals of contemporary practitioners: it is associated, rightly or wrongly, with elitism, privilege, and the abandonment of broader social and civic engagement. To name one immortal example, Edith Wharton’s depiction in *The Age of Innocence* (1920) of the opera house as a “world of fashion” in which the luxuriant sounds of “rare and exquisite” music echoed through the hall as “carefully-brushed, white-waistcoasted, buttonhole-flowered gentlemen” mingled in the box seats, written nearly a century ago, still sounds uncomfortably familiar, and media outlets churn out a seemingly endless stream of articles announcing the death of the art form – although its continued existence suggests that it has missed the news of its demise.

Contemporary musicians dedicated to social action might see their job as reclaiming that origin story by writing a sequel that better reflects their own priorities and sensibilities. **Yet if the idea of “art and social action” inherently looks forward, asking how society should change, it cannot simply discard the past.** Presentations and performances, particularly those by Paul Guyer and Robbie McCauley, asked important questions about how history and tradition shape



the way we understand art and social action, and a vigorous question-and-answer session during the last panel furthered the discussion. Perhaps the most expansive of the three paradigms, the idea of confronting tradition to create change proposes a complex and critical way of thinking about art forms as living and vital, shaped by history but not beholden to it.

The relationship between art and social action is itself rooted in a long and varied historical tradition. During the first panel of the day, Paul Guyer, the Jonathan Nelson Professor of Humanities and Philosophy at Brown University, outlined a genealogy of ideas about aesthetics in the context of academic philosophy. He noted that philosophers like Dewey and Greene were by no means the first to emphasize the connection between aesthetics and social life. Even before the coinage of the term “aesthetics” by a German student



of philosophy, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, in 1735, philosophers had since ancient times considered the topic in depth. Later canonized by Immanuel Kant, the subject became important to American philosophers as well. Guyer highlighted the work of Monroe Beardsley, a twentieth-century American philosopher whose “The Arts in the Life of Man” (1958) lists several possible social benefits to aesthetic experience: art might relieve tension, resolve conflicts within the self, develop the imagination, aid mental health, foster mutual sympathy, and offer an ideal for human life. But Guyer pointed out the difficulty, even impossibility, of testing these claims within the context of academic philosophy. Gesturing toward his fellow panelists, he noted that it ultimately falls to practitioners to determine whether these claims are empirically true.

Outside the discipline of aesthetic philosophy, other thinkers have asked related questions regarding art’s social potential. Throughout the

day, many symposium participants alluded to the work of educational theorist Paulo Freire. Freire, whose work has been widely influential in the field of arts education, believed that education could move a society away from an unequal past and toward a more just future. While working to develop literacy among rural Brazilian adults, he crafted a pedagogy based on imbuing students with a sense of their own transformative potential. **Freire believed that students must be empowered to realize that their present situation was temporary and open to change, and that they alone were uniquely qualified to make that change happen.**

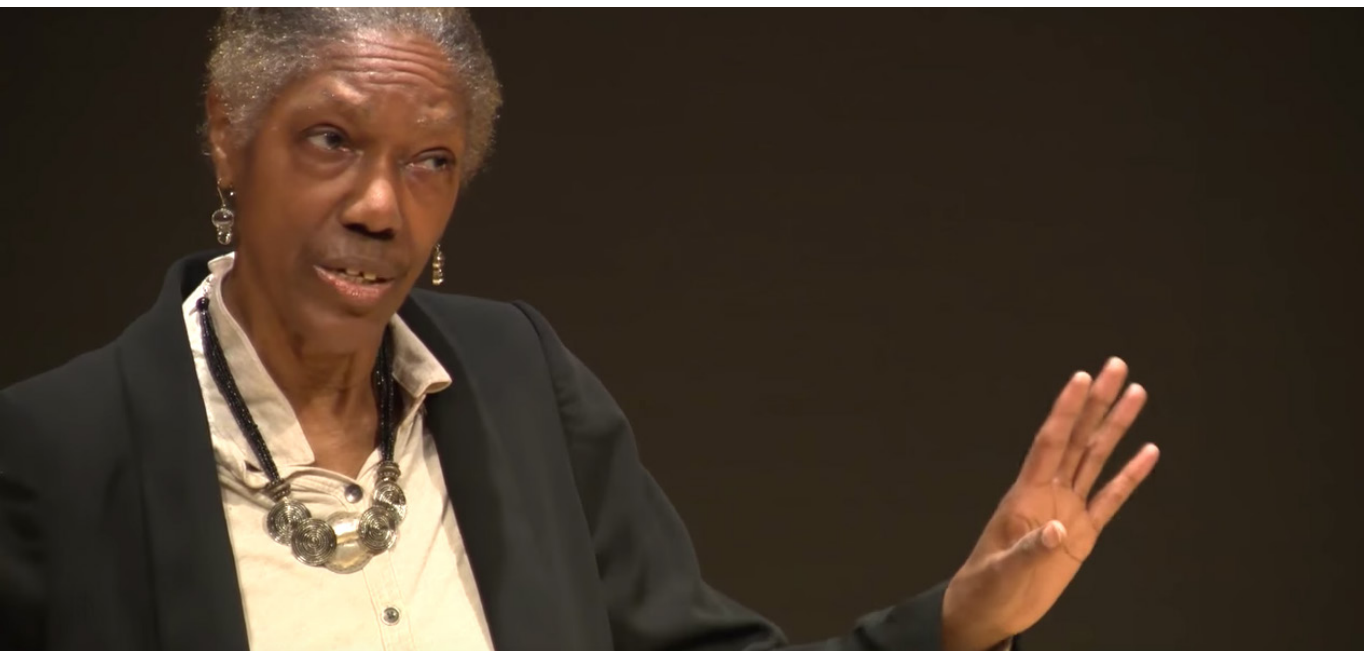
“In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation,” he wrote in his landmark text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), “they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.” Such transformation required a critical pedagogy. Freire drew a distinction between

the banking model of education, in which students serve as empty vessels for teachers to fill up with knowledge, and his preferred problem-posing method, in which “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.” Like John Dewey and Maxine Greene, Freire highlighted the fundamental need for individuals to perceive their world as open to change, and to perceive themselves as capable of changing it.

Freire’s theory of change begins with an honest, critical assessment of the present situation as a necessary precursor to substantive change. In the context of contemporary efforts to link classical music with social action, this sort of assessment requires asking some difficult questions – questions that lurk in the background of “why classical music?” Members of the audience raised some of these questions with respect to the ramifications of particular repertoire choices, given the connotations they traditional carry. What does this repertoire represent to students in marginalized communities? Does prioritizing the study and performance of the Western classical tradition devalue other musical forms that may be more familiar to students? What happens when well-intentioned outreach efforts perpetuate unequal power dynamics with respect to race and class? How do we deal with the superiority, idealism, and just plain snobbery shown by some advocates of classical music?



These are uncomfortable but essential questions, and participants answered them with candor. Chloe Kline described an instance in which Community MusicWorks commissioned a piece by a Venezuelan composer that required faculty performers to learn to play with a salsa band. “To learn a new language and vocabulary and to have our students see us learning in that way,” she noted, “was a really important acknowledgement of the fact that classical music is not the only vehicle, and that music on all levels and learning on all levels connects us as individuals and that we can grow with each other and from each other.” (Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar offered a different approach, arguing that in a situation where teachers have more knowledge of a particular musical form than their students, “the target group does not necessarily appreciate the knowledge you want to give them.”) In response to another question, about how an arts organization positions itself within a community, Kline noted that Community MusicWorks presents itself as a neighborhood service, “like



the barbershop next door or the convenience store on the corner.” She continued, “It’s not something we’re trying to impose on anybody, but it’s something we think has value and we’d like to share with people who are interested in getting involved.” This approach shifts the power dynamic by focusing on the provision of service rather than the transfer of knowledge, a move with which Freire would likely agree.

If questions of identity and history were implicit of the conversation described above, they were brought to the fore in Robbie McCauley’s performance during the session on “Jazz ‘n Class: Race, Identity and Art Making.” Her autobiographical performance, explored issues of family, jazz, black identity, history, and memory. It focuses on her relationship with her daughter, a violinist and composer, narrating a wide range of moments in their relationship, and the role music plays in their lives. The piece takes the form of a meditative

monologue, underscored by musical sounds and fragments of choreography that pulse through it like a heartbeat. In the world McCauley creates, music *is* tradition. Jazz – “also referred to as classical,” she notes at one point – is a birthright, and it is “older than time.” Near the end of the monologue, she shifts into poetry:

Jazz is like air

It nourishes us whether or not we
know all the complicated stuff of it.

We know the sources of it live in our
souls.

Whether we feel it or not, we look for
it to lean into.

Soul in this country is black.

We breathe here from a source of
blackness and all its contradictions

Jazz is ... air.

In McCauley's performance, music carries both the weight and the joy of history. The memories it evokes are complex and deeply personal. Toward the end of the piece, she reveals that when her daughter chose to write classical music rather than jazz, her initial reaction of perplexed skepticism ultimately becomes one of nuanced appreciation. Describing a performance of her daughter's music at Carnegie Hall, she declares: "The work was called diverse and inclusive. I thought it more ... personal, political, beautiful and free, which is who you are, and how I'd hoped you'd be." The performance closes with an image or, rather, two images, first juxtaposed and then slowly overlaid upon one another. One is of the blues singer Ma Rainey's house, newly refurbished as a tourist site in Georgia; the other is of her daughter standing at a statue of J. S. Bach in Germany, facing away from the camera, arms outstretched like a symphony conductor or, perhaps, a bird about to take flight.

Following the performance, McCauley led the audience in a collective aesthetic activity. Urging audience members to situate themselves in terms of a "personal bigger story," McCauley asked each person to remember the war she was born into, and to talk about that topic with her neighbor. The exercise prompted rich conversations and reflections; audience members who shared their experience with the group as a whole discussed both global events, like World War II and the September 11 attacks, and more intimate, personal experiences like family conflict. Participatory and reflective, the exercise

evoked many of the central ideas about aesthetic experience put forth by Dewey, Greene, and Freire: it asked people to situate their own experience in relation to the social, to interact with their neighbors through the aesthetic form of storytelling, and to draw critical connections between their own personal histories and the broader world.

In the discussion with Brian Meeks that followed her performance, McCauley noted that, for her, art is "a way to talk about the past in order to talk about the present and the future." This evocative phrase might serve as the guiding text for a paradigm that confronts tradition to create change. In the context of classical music in particular, talking about the past means moving away from celebratory language that exalts classical music's supposed universality or transcendence of cultural difference – an easy but blithe way to ignore the very real power dynamics at work in its creation and circulation. Instead, symposium participants suggested, it's imperative to think through this music's history honestly, to imagine it as one art form among many, and to ask how classical music and musicians can be responsive to the issues of communities they engage. As the energy surrounding contemporary arts initiatives demonstrates, this is an exciting and fruitful proposition, rich with future possibilities for, in Maxine Greene's phrase, imagining the world as if it could be otherwise.



PART FIVE

CONCLUSION

**Musicians from
Community MusicWorks
concluded the symposium
with a performance of
André Cormier’s “Cratères
d’Impact.”**



They filled the room, standing onstage, in the back of the hall, and in the aisles. Laura Cetilia, who coordinated the performance, gave a brief introduction, explaining that the piece is composed in an intentionally open-ended fashion. Rather than specifying instruments, note names, or rhythms, the composer notated a series of moments meant to evoke craters caused by meteors throughout geologic history. These moments are of various durations, corresponding to the depth of the particular crater, and performers are instructed to play in the high, middle, or low ranges of their instruments. Within those broad parameters, each individual performer decides where and what to play. Musicians used their smartphones to time the duration of each moment, ensuring that they would move through the piece at a unified pace. It seemed only right to end a day of conversation about art with art itself, and this selection seemed especially apt. It encapsulated some of the symposium’s key ideas: the importance of place, the necessity of diverse participation (the piece is intentionally

written so that players of varying technical levels can participate), the engagement with history and tradition (in its portrayal of ancient geologic events), and a commitment to innovation and newness (in the musicians’ use of smartphones to communicate with one another). And in the moments of silence that punctuated the piece, members of the audience were able to come into a greater awareness of the space, its sounds, and each other.

The three paradigms generated during the symposium represent a complex yet ultimately coherent way of thinking about the relationship between art and social action. While the first looked at the comparatively straightforward relationship between art and place, the second expanded in scope to look at the broader social and political context in which artists work. The third paradigm added the dimension of time into the mix, bringing in questions of tradition and history while looking also toward the future. Together, these paradigms acknowledge that



questions of place, power, politics, and tradition are intertwined with the processes of creating, performing, practicing, and teaching art. These ideas are not, of course, wholly new in and of themselves. The *possibility* of thinking in these terms is not new, as the many theoretical and historical examples offered throughout the day make clear. Philosophers from John Dewey to Paulo Freire, and artists across the nation and the globe, have long considered such questions. Yet the *necessity* of doing so represents an important shift. **We are left with a provocation: for artists in the twenty-first century, will social action be the foundation of art itself?**

The vitality, energy, and richness of the day's conversations suggest that such a change is certainly possible, if not yet pervasive. In a 2011 interview, Maxine Greene mused, "I believe in incompleteness. All my questions are incomplete, and my answers equally incomplete because if they were finished I'd have no place to go." The question of where these paradigms will go, and where they will take

us, remains open. Perhaps that incompleteness is part of what defines them, reminding us that they, too, will change. **For the moment, though, that incompleteness works as an impetus toward further imagination and further action, an invitation to make art that embraces the possibility of openness and change as it seeks a better and more just future.**

Appendix: the Symposium

The day's events, rooted in participants' varied experience and expertise, were diverse in format and focus. The first panel introduced "[Music and Social Action](#)," a course taught by Sebastian Ruth and offered by the Yale School of Music through the online education platform Coursera. Michael Yaffe and Sebastian Ruth offered opening remarks regarding the development of the course, which launched in conjunction with the symposium, as well as the opportunity to view a brief video excerpt. Additional comments by Adam Horowitz and Michael Steinberg provided a contextual framing that linked "Music and Social Action" to some of the larger themes of the symposium – art's potential to catalyze social transformation, and the meaning of social action as it relates to artistic work. In the next panel, "Aesthetic Experience and Social Imagination: The Legacy of Maxine Greene," Heidi Upton and Karen Zorn took up these themes as they discussed their involvement with educational programs at [St. John's University](#) and the [Longy School of Music](#), respectively. Complementing their practice-based accounts from a more theoretical angle, Paul Guyer offered a brief historical genealogy of the concept of aesthetics from its eighteenth-century origins to more recent iterations. In "Jazz 'n Class: Race, Identity and Art Making," the format

shifted from panel to performance. A powerful and deeply moving one-woman show, created and performed by Robbie McCauley, was followed by a question-and-answer session moderated by Brian Meeks. Ms. McCauley then led the audience in a storytelling exercise that prompted rich conversations among the group as a whole. The final session, "Placemaking and Citymaking: Art Meets Street," brought together panelists from various arts organizations – Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar of [Polyphony Foundation](#), Chloe Kline of [Community MusicWorks](#), and Prentice Onayemi of [ArtPlace America](#) – for a compelling discussion, moderated by Stefano Bloch, about art, politics, power, and community. The event concluded with a performance by Community MusicWorks students and faculty of André Cormier's "Cratères d'Impact." An experimental piece of music that is at once tranquil and provocative, "Cratères d'Impact" offered an opportunity for close listening, contemplation, and reflection as the day drew to a close.



Symposium Overview

Welcome & Introduction

Opening Remarks and Introduction to Coursera Music and Social Action

Adam Horowitz, *U.S. Department of Arts and Culture*

Sebastian Ruth, *Community MusicWorks, Founder & Artistic Director*

Michael Steinberg, *Brown University, Vice Provost for the Arts*

Michael Yaffe, *Yale School of Music, Associate Dean*

Session I

Aesthetic Education and Social Imagination: The Legacy of Maxine Greene

Paul Guyer, *Brown University, Jonathan Nelson Professor of Humanities and Philosophy*

Heidi Upton, *St. John's University, Associate Professor, and Maxine Greene Center President*

Karen Zorn, *Longy School of Music, President*

Session II

Jazz 'n Class: Race, Identity and Art Making

Robbie McCauley, *Performer & Playwright*

Brian Meeks, *Brown University, Professor and Chair, Africana Studies Department*

Session III

Placemaking and Citymaking: Art Meets Street

Nabeel Abboud-Ashkar, *Polyphony Foundation, Founder & Director*

Stefano Bloch, *Brown University, Presidential Diversity Fellow, Urban Studies*

Chloë Kline, *Community MusicWorks, Education Director*

Prentice Onayemi, *ArtPlace America, Director of Partnerships and Communications*

Performance by Community MusicWorks

André Cormier's *"Cratères d'Impact"*
CMW Players and Phase II Students

Symposium Video Links

Welcome *Opening Remarks and Introduction to Coursera Music and Social Action* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eB_EQY7SF8k&t=6s

Session I Aesthetic Experience and Social Imagination: The Legacy of Maxine Greene
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B3_ON23S_Mg&t=19s

Session II Jazz 'n Class - Race, Identity and Art Making
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-hujr3T9zQw>

Session III Placemaking and Citymaking: Art Meets Street
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UDS5MD4xzc&t=7s

Performance André Cormier's "Cratères d'Impact", CMW Players and Phase II Students
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-hyKMvK5I6k>

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Previous Peer Symposia Offered by Community MusicWorks

Music and Civil Society, co-presented with the Cogut Center for the Humanities at Brown University (2011)

Imagining Art + Social Change, co-presented with the Providence Youth Arts Collaborative (2008)

Education, Art, and Freedom (2004)

Transformative Teaching in the Arts, co-presented with New Urban Arts, Brown University Education Department, and the Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University (2000)