TRANSCRIPT OF BILL CLEVELAND'S OPENING TALK 'GAINING NEW GROUND: COLLABORATIVE POSSIBILITIES FOR RESEARCH AND COMMUNITY ARTS'
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So let me just begin by saying what an honour it is to be awake, and here this morning as a guest in your beautiful city in this beautiful building, to share stories and ideas, with a group of people – artists, researchers, community organisers, and a group of people who are really, at least, from what I've been told, interested, curious, about the positive role that research can play in community art-making. I'm also actually happy to be wearing my multiple hats, as you can see, so, as a researcher, but also as a writer and a musician. And given that we're really here to talk about art and community. What I'd like to begin with, is the art part, so I would like to share a song with you, to begin, which doesn't normally happy in a lecture, but that's what I'm going to try to do:

Darkness is a way of life when you can't find a way

Darkness is a way of life when you can't find a way

But when you find the way, darkness shatters like an old glass bottle when you find the way

Darkness shatters like an old glass bottle and a ticket falls out,

A ticket falls out to a lifetime of love.

A ticket falls out, a ticket to a lifetime of love.

I like singing for strangers. I like it, because, and I'm sure you all know this - you offer a song and some of that strangeness just disappears. It's a good feeling.

Another thing I like to do when I visit new places, new exciting places like this place here, Singapore is actually to bring friends along. So today in keeping with that tradition, I'd like to introduce you to a long-time friend. My friend here is Aaron, and actually you've been introduced to Aaron already. Aaron entered the National Library, right up here, joined me here and you through the words of the song that I just sang. These words are his. I met Aaron at a facility for difficult youth in California. He was heavily abused as a child, Aaron came to this facility as the age of nine years old, as an uncontrollable predator and self-abuser. His behaviour was so deeply disturbing that some there felt he was beyond all help. But Aaron fooled us. The ticket in Aaron's song and Aaron's poem is the music, and the poetry and the painting that infused his life during his two years at this facility. Each day that he was there, bit by bit, he used art-making to reconcile his past to a new, more trustful, new hopeful, new respectful relationship with the world. And incredibly, by the time he was eleven years old, he had progressed socially and as a student and was able to say, in no uncertain terms that 'art had saved his life'. Now Aaron had the opportunity to write his poem, these words, because this facility knew that the only way that Aaron could climb out of the dark place he occupied was literally to tell his story, directly and indirectly through the powerful tools of the arts. They knew this because after seeing the positive impact that art-making had made on kids like Aaron, they did research to better understand what was happening. And this understanding led them to making a commitment to infusing the arts in their programme, from top to bottom, not as therapy, but as a way of life. So, you may wonder why I am bringing Aaron into the room, why I'm sharing this story to start our day. I brought Aaron because I'd like you to keep him in the back of your mind of the rest of

my talk, not because I think all of you are going to run out and personally end up running programmes for troubled youths, but because Aaron's song, Aaron's presence is a good reminder of the potential power, and level of responsibility that the arts brings into our community. Both power and responsibility.

I also share Aaron's tale because without the research part of the story, the rest of it wouldn't have existed, and it would not have happened.

So this is Aaron's self-portrait. I think that it is appropriate that we see him looking outwards, in my own mind, he's looking out towards the 21st century, hopefully imagining a future that is radically different from the past that he brought, that I met him with. And you know, in some ways, Aaron's yearnings, Aaron's dreams, are not that different from that of many of our communities. Communities that are also in search of a new way to make sense and meaning in the world to find balance, to find common ground, in a world where it's increasingly obvious that we are all in this together, and the only way we're going to move forward is by calling upon our collective creativity and caring for one another. I'm assuming that this search for cultural common ground and some curiosity about the role that research can play in finding it, is part of what brought you here today.

I'm going to respond first, first part of my talk will be just basically sharing with you a bit about what we do at the Center for the Study of Art and Community (CSAC) and then also sharing some stories, some ideas about how research can be a useful tool for advancing community arts. And after that, we're going to give you a chance to connect with each other and learn a bit more about each other.

So I'm going to begin by drawing your attention to the screen here. As you came in, you may have noticed these images and questions, these images all come from community arts initiatives around the world that we've been involved in over the years. The words you see are really the basic threshold questions that framed the research challenge that was represented by each of these programmes, the diversity of these questions tells you something about the range and intensity of the programmes we've had the privilege to work with.

Although this is a small sample, they also tell us something about the diversity and spread of the global community arts movement. Working with programmes like these has taught us quite a lot, and one of the most obvious things that we have learnt is that although they come from different geographies, they all come from collaborations of artists and communities who are searching for a way to bring some kind of balance to their communities. A balance between the safe and the challenging, a balance between the material and the transcendent, tradition and modernity, opportunity and responsibility, chaos and order, a balanced future that honours and respects all the communities' stories, and trusts itself to embrace the full range of these stories – the good and the bad, the settling and the unsettling, a balanced community that engages its creators to help weave a strong fabric out of these many stories, to define its history, its struggles, its values, its beliefs and its dreams.

So the idea of a community story has been at the heart of much of our work for the past two decades at the Center. And at the heart of the stories that we encounter, they're always evolving, they're always moving, they're always changing, they're always teaching us things. And our simple contribution to our relationship with these stories is basically to try and document them, and then distil the lessons rising up, and sharing them with others who might benefit, people like you. Now

sometimes, this documentation is framed as 'research', sometimes it's framed as 'evaluation', sometimes as 'documentation', sometimes as 'story-telling'. Regardless of what it is called, at its core, what we do is driven by questions like the ones we were showing you before. We also have a central query that focuses and grounds our work. And that is this: How can the arts contribute to the development of caring, capable, sustainable and equitable communities? This of course gives rise to many other questions. So, sometimes we ask: What stimulates and nurtures our individual and collective creativity? Are there different aspects of the creative that are called up by different circumstances? Are there principles that can be applied, that can strengthen the creative impulse in communities? And how do cultural workers and community partners share power, define success and build trust? In addition to asking questions, I always feel it's important to share our beliefs, and our obvious biases in the way that we see the world and in the way that we work, not to assume that what we're saying is in fact the truth, but it is a point of view. So as you probably surmised, one thing is we see the arts and human creativity as central to the development of a healthy world in all aspects. This is best represented by three assertions that are the foundation of our approach to community cultural development. And these are: First is, that we believe that art-centred learning is absolutely for the healthy development and growth of every child. Next, we believe that robust, cultural development is necessary for the creation of healthy, productive and sustainable communities, no exceptions. And finally, the development of a world view that supports a sustainable global future, we believe is not possible without the active participation of society's creators and story-makers. So putting it simply, we help build bridges and make translations between a community's arts resources and the needs of the broader community, whatever they are. The term we use is arts-based-community development but there's dozens of terms used to describe this work. Some people call it 'community cultural development', some people call it 'creative place-making', and some people just come back home to that really safe space called 'community arts'. As the community arts field has grown and proliferated, so has confusion, at least in the part of the world that we work in - what is this all about? What does it really mean? So another part of our work is actually to get very clear about purposes and definitions. So, I'd like to share our working definitions so that we're at least on the same page in terms of this afternoon. So, we begin by looking at the word 'community', which is used a lot, which we say 'there's groups of people with common interest, defined by place, traditional, intention or spirit'. It's pretty broad. Now, this is a dictionary definition of the thing that many of us have come here to engage, you may recognise it: the arts – activities or outcomes related to the visual, performing, literary, media, design and inter-disciplinary art. That's sort of self-referential. I also have another definition that I love, that I keep under my pillow at night. This is Isabella Allende's definition of the arts:

Art is to humankind what dreams are to individuals. Art is a revelation of the collective human soul.

That helps me. That gets me through the night.

Now, arts-based community development. This thing, this name, art-centred activities that contribute to the sustained advancement of human dignity, health or productivity in a community. That's pretty broad too. So we go a little bit further than that. We actually have four neighbourhoods that we describe in the work. The first is – arts-based activities that nurture and heal people or communities. Another one is – arts-based activities that educate and informs us about ourselves and the world. Another is – arts-based activities that build and improve community capacity or infrastructure. And finally, arts-based activities that inspire or mobilise individuals or groups.

One thing I just want to assure you of, as you scribble away is that, I'm going to clean this whole talk up and give it to the National Arts Council, and they can do whatever they want, so you don't have to worry about taking notes, you get all these words for free.

So creating really was not a way to tell people what the truth is. Creating this was a way to begin a conversation. Because people are often confused about what this work is. This version of this map has been populated with different kinds of programmes throughout the community. And as you can see, these activities overlap and they work across many community sectors, so between the arts, the social services, community organising, education, economic development, the list goes on and on. So I'm sure you know that all this working across sectors involves a lot of intense collaboration. As such, a good deal of our work at the Center, is studying the nature and impact of creative collaborations.

So before I go on to a story I'd like to tell you, there are three footnotes I'd like to pass on to you. The first one is, we see the work of artists and arts organisations who are making art and presenting art in galleries and traditional theatres and performing venues, as operating within this eco-system, not as separate. We take the position that many of the outcomes that are included in this eco-system are intrinsic to art-making, whenever it happens. We do though, differentiate between these kind of art-centred activities and community arts work that is designed with the intention of addressing one or more community issues, like public safety, or cultural conflict or community identity.

Secondly, we would posit that the community arts sector operates within and depends upon the resources and capacities of the larger cultural eco-system. And is with the case of all eco-systems, the health of one part, let's say the community arts part, and the rest of it, is mutually dependent – one can't thrive without the other.

My third footnote concerns the historic role of artists and art-making. Historically, we see community arts as having a lineage, that goes back 40 to 60,000 years to the pre-historic role of the tribal spiritual and creative leaders, we believe there is an element of these tribal practices that was very much akin to artists working today, in service to community revitalization, community cohesion and community development.

So, given what I've shared thus far, I'm sure you'd have guessed that an awful lot of our work involves the asking of questions, questions, questions.

So I have some questions for you. You're ready to answer some questions? They're pretty simple. Alright, how many of you are involved in research? (just raise your hand if you are). Okay, great, how many of you are involved in art-making in some way? Alright, I see some hands, similar hands. How many of you are involved in work that is aimed at strengthening community or improving community life? One more question: how many of you find yourselves searching for the answers to questions as a part of your work? Everybody, right!

So based on this basic definition, from the Oxford Dictionary, most of you are exhibiting some kind of research-like behaviour. Here's another word, I mentioned it before, that shows up in our work a lot: Evaluation. I bring research and evaluation up together, because at their centre, the realms of evaluation and research have a fairly fuzzy border - they often over-lap. But simply, the folks who

come to us want help with learning about their work. Sometimes, it's the more evaluative 'Gee, what's happened?' Or 'How did it go?'

Sometimes, it leans a little bit more in the direction of research with questions like 'What's actually going on here? And how DOES that work? How does that happen? From a practical point of view, much of our work involves both of these realms and this is because often, community art-making operates in the realm of what is called 'action research'. This is because the doing and the learning about the doing are almost always happening simultaneously. So from this point on I'm just going to use one of those words, I'll just refer to it all as 'research'. So, we're all here to talk about how research can benefit art-making that in turn benefits society. Given this, I should probably share another one of our biases at the Center: we believe that in order to fulfil their true potential, community arts programmes need to be constantly learning from the work as it happens in real time, a churning of learning. In the way that a painter is constantly adjusting and deciding how colour, line and form and materials combine in a way to manifest what they see in their mind's eye, in the same way that a composer is always evaluating juxtaposing a melody, and harmony and rhythm to fulfil their musical vision .

So I'm sure you all know, many of you who are artists, many of you who work in support of the arts - artists do this all the time, naturally, assessing how things are going, making assessments, improvising new approaches along the way, this is an organic research and learning process, that I'm sure is operating within many of the projects that you are all involved in. So the question we're addressing today is: how can we take this organic learning process to another level? Maybe the better question is: what does that look like and why should I want to do it?

So, I'm going to address that question with a story. A few years ago, I began working with an organisation called the Pomegranate Centre, they're located in the western United States. Now, Pomegranate brings together neighbours, together to design and build what they call 'gathering places'. A gathering place can be a small park, or a playground or a neighbourhood performance space or a community garden, the key defining feature of a gathering space is that it is an accessible space where people in the community gather together, that is seen and experienced by everybody in the community as open and safe and welcoming. The central design feature of the Pomegranate process is that these artful, beautiful, one-of-a-kind commons, are designed and built by the people who use them. Pomegranate's reason for working this way are pretty simple. The simple idea is that if people join together to make something for everyone's benefit. First they're more likely to use it. Second, they're going to value it and take care of it. But the deep involvement of these proud, common ground builders is more than just a lovely physical space. It also creates something called social capital, that results in what Pomegranate describes as shaping resilient and collaborative communities. So they've been doing this for 27 years. Recently, they began to train people in their process. It's a process they call 'multiple victories', and they started considering this training, they realised that a lot of what they knew about their own work, actually had never been formally evaluated. They also realised that even though they knew that the people that worked with them valued what they did. That for someone who wasn't there, it was not easily translated. So this was becoming extremely important, and that's because, in the US, there is a heightened interest due to what our National Endowment for the Arts calls Creative Place-making, which is basically what Pomegranate has been doing for 27 years. But Pomegranate needed very badly in the face of all this, evidence that pointed definitively to the less obvious long-term impact of their work. So they asked

us to help, and in helping, we decided to focus on a place called Azalea Park, which is in San Diego California, and the site that was going to become the Gathering Place was a road-end, a dead-end that was up against a wild canyon that was a little dangerous, so it had a ring of barbed wire around it. As you can see, it was pretty dirty and uninviting. So in our research, we focused on three areas. Pretty simple. Basically, impact on the community, impact on the arts, impact on the participating organisations that were part of the project. Over the 17 weeks of this project, sometimes called Alazea Park, also called Manzanita cos that's the street, we used different instruments to collect data, a lot of things that you're probably familiar with - interviews, surveys, focus groups with all the people involved in the project, we did some statistical analysis, some documentation of the demographics of the area, participation statistics, some financial analysis, we actually did an analysis of media over time, around the community, and also something we've been doing a lot lately called network mapping to actually look at the relationships that got created in the project. In all, over 300 individuals and organisations were involved in the research, we collected a lot of data. Now, it may seem like a lot of work but an awful lot of this data was user-generated, so it made it less onerous. So here's some of the things that we found out. So the project, as I said, was 17 weeks, during that time, 9 community meetings were convened. The cost of the actual thing from start to finish, all the materials, everything was $20,000. And believe it or not, this actual park was built in four days. As you can see, it involved a lot of different people, ages 4 to 79, 206 people volunteered and the outcome was a beautiful space that was a lot different from the ugly space that was there before. Now, this place, Azalea Park has a population of about 24,000 people, and those people , when they gave us feedback, basically said, 'Okay, our community is a safer place for family and children. Our community has a deeper and stronger sense of ownership, not only of this community but this place we built together. We have a stronger sense of identity as members of a specific community. For the artists involved, the artists said basically they had grown professionally, in two particular areas: citizen-centred design strategies and arts-based community organising. All of the participating 15 artists said they were incorporating these new skills in work that was taking place after the project. Of the organisations there, there are over a hundred organisations there. The number one thing they found valuable about this is this network of relationships between individuals and organisations, which actually became a creative community building network in San Diego after the project. Now the actual report that we came up with is over a hundred pages long and it has lots of charts, and graphs and pictures. But you may be asking, 'What does a phonebook of charts, graphs and pictures, how does that help folks, how does that help community?'

So here's a bit of how the research really helped, not just the programme but the research itself. For the community itself, most importantly, the Gathering Place story was told in a structured and focused way, which in turn, strengthened the community's reputation internally and externally, which ultimately dramatically increased the community's sense of identity and pride. For the Pomegranate Center itself, their approach, the Pomegranate process, is now much better known, and regarded as a credible community development strategy. They also have incorporated the things that they learnt into future programmes and into their training, which in turn has allowed them to attract new resources to their work, so they have more jobs. For the artists, the research allowed them to actually turn inward, and identify their own best practices. It also established the artists who were hard to define for people, as credible professionals working in the community. And finally, once again, that credibility ended up turning more jobs, more work. Other beneficiaries to this research were, as I said, there were hundreds of organisations, and that network map actually

turned into a tangible beneficial resource that they have been mining ever since. And at the end of the day, the people who invested in this, the funders, ended up being able to say there was a valuable return on investment that was quantified. Now when we study a programme like Pomegranate, we wanted to know not just if the art-making is actually benefitting people, families and communities, but also how that benefit occurs, how does involvement in the arts help neighbours connect more deeply, feel safer, how does involvement in the help community members' awareness and understanding of significant issues and their actual participation in those issues. So these kinds of 'if', 'how', 'cause-effect' questions are particularly important for the organisations that we work with. They're curious about this too. And that's because this kind of information can be used in many ways.

So, here are some of those uses. Not all, but some of the main ways. Obviously, just to understand the impact of the work. To be able to name it, and quantify it, and look at it, and describe it. Once you do that, you can actually turn around and improve the work, improve your practice, but you could also, on the other hand, basically say, 'Here's the work, we have this research, it now validates and we can use it to promote the work, and ultimately, all this work has stakeholders. You can feedback that information to the stakeholders so that everybody's on the same page about what has happened as a result of the work. It also allows people who are doing this kind of work to investigate and interrogate the assumptions they had about what they were up to. It makes them accountable in many cases. Ultimately, it can help us all understand the community arts field, and full circle, also give us a new resource to learn about community issues and community dynamics. This study also reinforced some of the major things we learnt over time about researching community arts programmes. Some lessons. So I'm going to leave you with a few lessons. First of all, before you put on your researcher hat, give yourself a break and get clear about what you want to learn, and why you want to learn it. That may seem simple but sometimes people just go off half-cocked and just start researching without a focused idea of what they want to know. Then, align your methods with your intention, so that you're not mixing and matching in a way that is incompatible. Make sure that you understand all the audiences that your research is going to be addressed to. Really important, make sure it is in service to the work. Sometimes we end up with research that is in service to the research, which is kind of backwards. I also encourage folks, especially working cross-sector, is don't re-invent the wheel. Folks in other sectors are constantly doing documentation and research, if they have something going that's useful, don't re-invent the wheel, use the stuff they are already doing. Recognise that research can both support the work but it can also distort the work, so do no harm. Remember please that research, and a chart, and a graph is not the truth, it's just a tool, a statistic. And finally, it's really important to recognise that you need to take advantage. There is an inherent advantage to arts-based work that the arts can illuminate the story in ways that charts and graphs can never illuminate the story.

So, I'm just about done here. I'd like to finish with another story.

In the late 1970s, a long time ago, there was a big US Department of Labour programme that provided support for thousands of artists, unemployed artists to go to work with community-based agencies, all over the United Sates. One of these programmes brought dancers to senior centres, to work with very frail elderly citizens, who were very often isolated and immobile, and sometimes depressed. The programme placed five teams of dancers, who conducted two-week residences in senior centres located throughout San Francisco Bay area. And the initial results were extraordinary.

The seniors really loved moving, who wouldn't? They ended up more active socially and physically. And more importantly, the kind of depression that was there was decreased. So near the end of the programme, the dancers were invited back to this gathering, and they were going to hear the results of the research that had been done on the whole programme. And they came to the meeting really excited, with great expectancy, excited to hear the good news. And that was not what they heard. The researchers discovered that in the weeks following the end of each residency, the incidents of depression and suicide attempts among the programme's participants had increased dramatically.

The lesson: you don't turn people on to something new and vital in their lives and then leave them in the lurch after a few weeks. Though this lesson was tough, it gave rise to a really important design standard for arts-based community work, namely, effective and ethical arts-based programmes for vulnerable populations need to be sustained. So as I said at the beginning of my talk, I believe that effective arts-based community programmes and research basically need to evaluate themselves to do research in order to be effective. Beyond this, we have an ethical and moral responsibility to the communities and people that we serve, to be as clear as we can be about our intentions, and our impact. So as you move forward here in Singapore, with your work as artists, as researchers, as community organisers, I encourage you to bring Aaron back into your mind, and consider as you go forward, maybe involving research, documentation, to do it with accountability, and with sensitivity and with respect. Done well, I believe it will make community arts more accountable and provide tangible benefits for everyone else involved. Thank you.