

Arts inspired change – a dialogue on community cultural development

Paula Kramer & Till Baumann

Paula: As we were asked to talk about and investigate together what things are moved, are being changed and transformed through projects of CCD – I would like to start directly with asking you that basic question: What do you think is moved, what is changed or transformed through projects of community cultural development?

Till: What is moved ... primarily, thinking about theatre or dance: bodies. Thinking about visual arts: brushes, for example. And hearts and minds of course, in all cases. I think CCD is basically about exploring creative languages for dealing with social realities. Exploring creative representations of reality can be personally very moving, especially when you start to realize that you are able to be an artist, that arts and culture is nothing reserved for people with the right qualification or enough money. Some of the most beautiful CCD experiences I have are when people surprise themselves by what they are able to do. And in CCD they usually do this in communication with others. Theatre – for example – can become a language with which you can develop new forms of dialogue. It can help you to reflect on social realities and develop strategies for changing them, if you want to change them. And all of this is essentially a collective process.

Paula: Yes, I really agree - CCD processes have that particular quality of touching or moving the individual while at the same time being a collective process that has the intention to achieve change in social realities. I appreciate that you talk about the development of *strategies* to achieve social change, because many times I think it is expected that one project of CCD changes the structure of – how social service is provided in a town – to take an invented example. From processes of structural change (on the level of society, policy or political and economic systems for example), I think we know that change takes a long time, a lot of effort and commitment, and cannot be achieved through one project, be it CCD or a different methodological approach. I say that not to disqualify our work, on the contrary! I say this to clarify that there is no quick fix for political change and that giving money to realize one project of CCD is often to show “yes, we are doing something”, hoping then that the arts or an artist will solve a problem (in a worst case not with but *for* the community). But what is needed just as much is commitment to implement change on the structural level. That’s why I like

that you talk about developing *strategies*, because I think that is a field in which CCD is really very strong, and its success is very visible. Through the creative process a lot of ideas are generated, which can help to shape, sustain and inspire a process of political action.

Most visible during the creative process is oftentimes individual change, I think, change in the persons who participated in a CCD process, as you mentioned before. Collective processes where we work creatively on a social topic are so precious, because individual change becomes tangible, and we witness and support our changes together. This helps us in the effort to sustain the long process towards structural change, which often seems hard to reach!

Till: I think in CCD there is no social change without personal change, and structures change when people decide to change them. I agree that there is no CCD experience that leaves you “unchanged” on a personal level. Some changes are big, others very small, sometimes momentaneous, sometimes quite sustainable. Let’s take a Forum Theatre process as an example: people exploring many different ideas of changing reality. What happens with those ideas? There is something that Boal calls extrapolation – taking those ideas to your everyday life. This is an individual decision and an individual responsibility. But what about structural change? I do think that in a CCD process ideas and strategies for structural change can be developed. But the crucial question is: what happens with those ideas? Who assumes the responsibility to carry on with the process, to publish ideas, to implement strategies? Usually it is difficult to do this on your own – you need contacts, you need support, you need pressure from below. The Legislative Theatre experiment in Rio de Janeiro would not have worked without the cooperation with the PT, the Partido dos Trabalhadores. The social change you can achieve depends very much on the way a CCD process is linked to social reality.

Paula: Yes, very true. The way you *link* a workshop to social reality really influences if you can or cannot achieve change outside your workshop. It really makes a difference if you, as workshop or project facilitator, actively seek the link of your work to processes that happen outside of it. Regarding this work of creating links I’d be curious to hear if you could share some of your experiences from workshops you have given – in Berlin or Europe as well as in Central America for example.

Till: Let me give you an example. My colleague Harald Hahn and me have been cooperating with the “Clean

Clothes Campaign” in Europe for several years. The campaign works on the topic of working conditions in the globalised textile industry – the world of export processing zones and maquilas in Central America, South East Asia and Eastern Europe, where young women produce the clothes we can buy in Berlin or Barcelona. The inhumanity of their working conditions is not visible when you go to Karstadt or Corte Inglés to buy a new shirt. One of our first projects was a street performance with the theatre group “piquete” from Berlin, you will remember this. We performed in shopping areas, pedestrian zones, in front of big department stores, trying to raise consumer awareness on the topic. After and during the performance the spectators had the possibility to speak to campaigners, to receive material and to go into the department stores, asking under which conditions the products were produced, leaving postcards to be passed on to the managers etc. A few years later I worked in El Salvador, one of the countries with many maquilas and many export processing zones. It was a Forum Theatre workshop and the participants chose the situation of maquila workers as a topic: their working conditions, the problems they get when they try to organise themselves, the difficult situation in their families when they lose their employment. This time the perspective was very different, in the Forum Theatre workshop the participants were reflecting on possibilities of changing an oppressive situation from within: within the maquila, within the society, working on a situation that happened in their own neighbourhood, just a few kilometres from the capital San Salvador. So basically we were working about the same topic in different parts of the world. In El Salvador the key questions were: how can maquila workers organise their resistance? How can they be supported from within the Salvadorian society? In Berlin our work was guided by questions such as: how can we create awareness at the places where the products are being sold, how can we offer opportunities for consumers to put pressure on a big company to change the situation of maquila workers?

Paula: Well, yes, your answer shows one important option, and that is to link a CCD process or workshop to an existing campaign, like the “Clean Clothes Campaign” for example. Our work from “piquete” was like a small part of a larger campaign, which began before we developed a piece and continued after. As a member of “piquete” however, I really wonder, if our work in fact changed anything on the structural level. Did people really put pressure on places that sell clothing that are produced under inhumane conditions? Did conditions of production change? I mean, yes, some took a moment to sign a petition or to send a postcard to inquire about working conditions in the factories where clothing is produced. But did anything “really” change?

Till: Well – I think there is a difference if we talk about a community-based Forum Theatre process in which ideas and strategies for structural change in the community are developed or about street theatre performance which are contextualised in a broad international campaign. The „Clean Clothes Campaign“ is part of a global movement, the „movement of movements“ of Seattle, Genova and Porto Alegre, which has a lot of good experiences with the strategy of publicly denouncing companies for their inhuman practices. As Naomi Klein has pointed out in „No Logo“, having a nice image has become extremely important for multinational companies in neoliberal capitalism. This is why campaigns such as the „Clean Clothes Campaign“ have really managed to challenge elephants such as Nike, adidas or Karstadt. And part of this challenge is that Karstadt or Corte Inglés have to deal with theatre groups performing in front of their shop windows and establishing a connection that the managers of Karstadt or Corte Inglés do not want to establish: between the products they sell and the conditions under which those products are produced – offering information to consumers, asking them to go inside and speak to the staff, leaving protest cards for the managers etc. Sometimes journalists are present, television teams, as in the case of “piquete” This can be very embarrassing for Karstadt or Corte Inglés. With the result that the companies need to explain themselves and react to public pressure, in their own interest, and this has happened on various occasions. Which part of those campaign successes can be linked directly to the specific day that a theatre group protested theatrically in front of the shop windows – well, this won’t be easy to tell.

Paula: Your example makes me think that apart from personal level, it seems to be the *local* social or political level, where DCC inspired social change is most easily visible. Which doesn’t mean that raising awareness for global issues and interdependencies aren’t also an important part of our work. But looking at the process of Legislative Theatre and its repercussions in Brazil, for example, on which political level would you say it is most successful? From what I know the laws created in relationship with processes of Legislative Theatre mostly concerned the local or regional level, is that true?

Till: To be honest I don’t know what the „local level“ could be in a city like Rio de Janeiro. The metropolitan area of Rio has more inhabitants than the country of Portugal. But it is true that most of the laws created in the Brazilian Legislative Theatre process were approved by the Municipal Chamber of Rio de Janeiro, which has a lot more legislative power than for example the municipal parliaments in Germany. There have been some laws

on the regional level too, *leis estaduais*, in the state of Rio de Janeiro (which has close to 15 million inhabitants). But the ideas were born on a more local level: in the communities, the theatre groups, during the Forum Theatre performances in the streets and the community centres.

Paula: With many things we have talked about, it seems hard to find closure, but then maybe the good thing is, that we don't need closure, in fact we need the very opposite. To continue and to keep experimenting. One of the most exciting and successful things about CCD, I think, is that it changes its face and form depending on *where* and *with whom* a project is carried out. I like the perspective that not even the idea of "local" means the same thing everywhere, even though there is a connecting notion of what local means. Another important factor for achieving change and transformation I think is that you are willing and able to invest a lot of time (meaning money, as well, or a continuous structure that sustains you) to develop from, with or alongside an artistic process a concrete political campaign or action. To really go through all those little steps of doing a CCD project in a community and from there develop a political campaign together, and to continue this process for the many years that it needs until structural change takes place.

Till: So is there any example you can think of where this change has taken place and has become visible?

Paula: I was very impressed by the work Loraine Leeson presented at the third and last conference of CCD in March 2006 in Granollers. She has been developing her artistic and political work for 25 years within the Dockland's community in London, and I guess her work is a good example, which shows that local political structures, meaning the level of the municipality, can be changed through processes of CCD, if the work is continued for a substantial amount of time, often years. The relationships established between artists and political activists have developed and provide sustainable collaborations over the years. But since the concept of "change" can mean very different things to each person, I think the only way to truly find out what all can be transformed by processes and projects of CCD is to become part of a project and to continue exploring with different colleagues and in different contexts. One thing that seems crucial to me is to keep sharing our experiences to learn from each other and to keep our work alive. I further think what became quite clear in our conversation is that CCD inspired change needs long standing commitment and is more successful if links are established to larger political and social processes. I would like to close with encouraging practitioners of CCD

to continue to ask themselves the very question of *what kind* of change they are aiming for and *on which level* they would like for transformations to take place and to which existing efforts in that direction they could establish *links*. It is then continuous dialogue and collaboration, which can help immensely to take our work into the direction we are personally aiming for.

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Both are working as part of the association “sabisa – performing change” in Berlin (www.sabisa.de), where they give workshops and create forums for the international exchange and debate of applying arts towards social change. An emphasis of sabisa’s work is the transfer of methodologies and experiences from the Global South to the North.