Culture of Justice

APRIL 21, 2021

Focus: Lessons from arts-based interventions in carceral facilities and communities
Goal: Identifying strengths and challenges related to these interventions and their broader contexts

KEY TAKEAWAYS
Arts programs for system-involved and community youth can offer emotional release and momentary autonomy while developing transferrable skills, entrepreneurship, and job readiness.
- System-involved youth are still children
- Open-ended, non-curriculum-based activities allow for play and development of autonomy
- Job readiness comes via training and support
  - E.g. résumé writing, mock interviews, referrals to local employers
  - Organizations can offer part-time employment and use of their website as sales platform
- Mix of participants maintains anonymity
- Key: long-term relationship building and community ties

Art unlocks healing, but it remains difficult to convey its practical and instrumental benefits.
- Breaks down boundaries faster than other interventions, e.g. therapy
- Counteracts singular narrative focused on the worst day of a person’s life
  - Allows for sharing totality and beauty of a life with someone’s loved ones outside
- Can support advocacy efforts with visuals, but deeper collaboration is limited due to siloes

Youth committees and programs should give youths a seat at the table.
- Without youth, there is no future
- Intergenerational discourse combines energy and new ideas with experience
  - E.g. protest cannot by itself lead to change

Visual literacy—the ability to understand images and the effect they are intended to have upon the viewer—is important.
- How one is portrayed affects how one is treated
- People must be able to tell their own story rather than allowing others to tell it for them

Systems like education, housing, banking, law enforcement, food access can all be designed to perpetuate systemic inequalities and must be reformed to advance equality.
- Policymakers and politicians must hear uncommon voices with uncommon experiences
- Knowledge for change resides in those who experienced the dehumanization and violence of the system, as well as in those who control the systems
  - This knowledge must be shared

Equal education is particularly important, but structural choices can inhibit its operation.
- Equality is necessary
  - In access and for varied learning styles
- US educational system, for example, relies on property tax funding, exacerbating socio-economic disparities
- Governments interested in preventing insurrection or hiding national sins control education

Many enter this work for personal reasons and some have to leave for the same. That is not a failure.
- Art can be a way to save oneself and others
- Important to support those doing this work, wherever they sit, and to affirm the belief in it

KEY EXAMPLES
- Capturing Belief (Detroit, MI)
- Baltimore Youth Arts (Baltimore, MD)
- Million Book Project (US)
- Performing Statistics (Richmond, VA/US)
- Mural Arts (Philadelphia, PA)
- Youth Art & Self Empowerment Project (Philadelphia, PA)
- Commissioner for Future Generations (Wales)

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES
- Afro-Pessimism works
- Exterminate All the Brutes (Film)
- Kerner Commission report
- The 1968 Kerner Commission Got It Right, But Nobody Listened® by Alice George