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PARTICIPATORY ARTS AND PEACEBUILDING: EMBODYING AND CHALLENGING RECONCILIATION

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Art and arts-based projects are gaining increasing attention as an alternative to traditional peace-building mechanisms and the last decade has seen a more deliberate application of the arts into peace-building work. Focusing on the restorative and transformative potential of community rooted arts to support conflict-affected communities to engage in dialogue, to heal the past and to re-build a future, this essay explores the role of participatory arts in peace and reconciliation processes. Within the emerging field of 'strategic arts-based peacebuilding' (Shank and Schirch 2008), how do community artists and arts organisers conceptualise and define their work and its relation to wider reconciliation and peace efforts?

This essay draws on work undertaken as part of Art and Reconciliation: Conflict, Culture and Community, a multidisciplinary AHRC funded research initiative exploring the relationship between the arts and reconciliation¹. It discusses two long-term participatory arts initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina with communities affected and divided by atrocity and conflict. Listening to the perspectives of the practitioners behind Most Mira and Srebrenica Children's Music Theatre with Opera Circus UK this research explores how they frame their contribution to peace and reconciliation processes. In communities who are distrustful of politicised discourses around reconciliation how do participatory arts projects challenge what is that is imagined as 'reconciliation'?

¹Art and Reconciliation brings together 3 universities: Kings College, University of the Arts, London and the London School of Economics and is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For further information see: <https://artreconciliation.org/>

Focusing on the emergent, open-ended and adaptive capacity of participatory arts to respond to communities and act as a vehicle for community driven reconciliation, this article explores how participatory arts projects supports the social healing of communities affected by violence and conflict. While much commissioned arts work is memory focused, community arts work focuses on re-building relations in the present and engaging with the past in order to re-imagine a future. In this way participatory arts engage with possibility and looks to create something that does not yet exist, much as the process of peace-building itself (Hunter and Page 2014). In trying to create something new, its outcomes cannot be predefined and thus its value is hard to determine or definitively prove.

In a funding environment where participatory arts projects are undervalued and under-resourced, it is argued that their potential contribution to peace-building, and in supporting communities to define and build reconciliation on their own terms, has yet to be fully realised. A key barrier is the disjuncture between how arts practitioners define their work and how programmatic and funding imperatives requires them to frame their activities, imposing a notion of reconciliation that is often at odds with the values that drive participatory arts practice. While programmatic thinking makes the reconciliation agenda explicit, participatory artists understand it to be implicit to a wider set of values and a process that need to be embodied by the community and allowed to emerge over time and on its own terms. Long-term participatory arts work supports community driven reconciliation but short-termism undermines and impedes its potential as a peace-building tool.

Context: Art, peace-building and reconciliation

Historically, the first examples of arts projects that strategically sought to support peace and reconciliation processes happened in Northern Ireland, where after the Good Friday Agreement in 1988 a considerable amount was invested into community theatre projects and mural paintings amongst other initiatives (Jennings & Baldwin 2010), and in South Africa, where numerous artistic projects took place alongside and after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in 1996. In the subsequent three decades the arts have increasingly gained attention as a 'soft power' strategy for peace-building and conflict transformation and have been purposefully harnessed within post conflict peace and reconciliation processes throughout Latin America, Africa, Asia and Europe and the Middle East.

Advocates, such as the influential peace activist and scholar Jean Paul Lederach, argue that the orientation towards professionalization, technique and management in the field of conflict resolution has overshadowed, underestimated and often forgotten, the art of the creative process that is crucial to responding to deep-rooted conflict and building social change (2005). The growing recognition of the central importance of identity politics and the need for an interdisciplinary approach has paved the way for psychosocial, artistic and cultural perspectives to complement mainstream institutional, political, legal and structural approaches to peace-building. There is a call for arts and culture to be 'mainstreamed' into peace-building activities².

While the arts for peace-building is often spoken about in generic terms a survey of the field demonstrates the expansive and plural nature of existing practice. Arts work that seeks to record and remember the stories of the victims of violence is different to arts work that seeks to ease inter-ethnic tension and conflict. A children's music workshop is different to a professional theatre production. An arts initiative commissioned by a government led reconciliation commission is different to a community driven arts project. Taking the specific example of transitional justice settings, the arts can be used to contribute towards transitional justice initiatives such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and they can also play a role in providing a critique of the denialism and ideology of transitional justice in specific national projects (Rush & Simic 2014). As such the arts can both complement or challenge official, national or localised narratives.

Shane & Schirch (2008) define a mode of 'strategic arts-based peace-building' that is the focus of this paper. This is artistic activity that pushes beyond one-off attempts to use the arts to address conflict and is undertaken with a clear intention to support peace building and reconciliation. Primarily realised through participatory or community engaged arts, it is grounded in a commitment to listening to communities and enabling community-driven change; and is linked to conceptual frameworks with long-term perspectives on participatory methods, social change and the role of the arts within those processes.

Youth participatory arts in Bosnia-Herzegovina

In the Balkans, art has played an important role in fostering interaction and helping to facilitate reconciliation in a region where extreme nationalist discourse has fuelled recent conflicts and entrenched division and fear of the other. Zelizer, in his survey of arts and peace-building in the Balkans, highlights a 'proliferation of youth and arts based programs throughout the country' (2003:69). He notes that while some arts activities are undertaken with the specific intent of bringing people together (such as inter-ethnic and inter-faith choirs) much of the surveyed arts projects categorise their work as a creative activity to support and positively occupy youth rather than peace-building and reconciliation. This question of intention and how explicitly youth participatory arts projects do or don't align themselves to reconciliation processes provides a useful lens through which to consider the contribution the arts play in bolstering community led reconciliation.

Most Mira (Bridge of Peace) was founded in 2008 'to build a better, more peaceful future' for the young people of Prijedor and its surrounding areas in north west Bosnia; one of the regions most severely affected by the recent conflict and home to three of Bosnia's most fatal concentration camps. Most Mira brings young people together 'to make friends across ethnicities and celebrate diversity'³ through youth arts festivals, arts and peace-building workshops, visits and tours.

² See report from Culture and Conflicts: The Case of Ukraine, a 2014 seminar held by Salzburg Global, More Europe and the European External Action Service: <http://www.salzburgglobal.org/topics/article/culture-and-conflicts-the-case-of-ukraine.html>

³ Quotes taken from the website: <http://www.mostmiraproject.org/>

Initially the project approached 2 villages, about 15 miles apart between which there had been no communication since the war when members of one village had been involved in attacking and destroying the other village. They met much resistance but with the support of two teachers they managed to co-ordinate a week-long arts festival. It ran for 3 years involving 300-450 children, aged 7-14, from all ethnic backgrounds from 4 segregated schools and 2 youth groups in the area. The festival was coordinated and run by a large group of local and international volunteers and artists who ran participatory workshops in art, drama, dance, music, circus skills, photography and media.

Since 2012, they have worked with school children aged 10 -14 years old on drama projects lasting 6-9 months that culminate in performances in the local theatre and in each other's schools. In the last couple of years, leadership and democracy workshops and training have also been run for young people in Preijedor. Most Mira have been invited to establish a permanent Peace Centre in Kevljani and an architecture workshop resulted in a design that received planning approval in March 2016. Funds are now being raised to build the Centre.

Kemal Pervanic, one of Most Mira's founding trustees, was born in Preijedor and was himself a survivor of the notorious Omarska concentration camp. He believes that the new generations of Bosnians who have nothing to do with the war are its greatest victims because their parents, teachers and community leaders are transferring the legacy of previous wars to them, teaching them to fear each other. He was motivated

to start the organisation because he wanted to do something to help young people to escape from the cycle of conflict, distrust and hate (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview).

Although not from an arts background himself, Pervanic saw that the arts provided a safe, common and neutral space for people from all sides to come together, to push boundaries and create something new and unrelated to conflict. In his mind art is the perfect tool for building reconciliation (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview). He describes how when he started the project community leaders and parents questioned its motivations and had to be convinced to allow their children to participate. Using the arts they were able to gain people's trust. Disassociated from political activity, the arts opened up a new space where people could come together. After the first 3-4 years when trust had been built then they could start to talk more explicitly about the past and building a different kind of future (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview).

Participatory approaches and learning are central to Most Mira's approach and stand in direct contrast to the rigid, traditional education models used in most Bosnian classrooms. International volunteers (many from the UK) have also been important. Contrary to the critique against international artists being parachuted in, Most Mira have found that international volunteers bring new ideas and energy and crucially they are not restricted or burdened by local politics. They point out many community members participate because of the novelty of the international volunteers. They draw people in who might otherwise have stayed at home and push them beyond their comfort zone and to try something new (Most Mira 2013).

In Srebrenica, the town that suffered the devastating massacre of more than 8000 Bosniaks, mainly men and boys, during the Bosnian war, a group of Serb, Croat and Bosniak young people, having participated in a music workshop, came together to form the Srebrenica Children's Music Theatre, leading workshops and creating performances with and for children in the town. While touring a professional opera through Bosnia in 2007, the UK arts charity, Opera Circus UK, was invited to come and meet with the young people of Srebrenica. They wanted more training and experience in choreography, drama, music and stage and lighting skills and they wanted good news to come out of Srebrenica.

This led to an ongoing relationship with Opera Circus UK responding to the evident desire of the young people to use artistic and cultural practice to create opportunities for young people in their town. Various different projects and initiatives have taken place over the years. These included performance programmes and youth and school exchanges between Srebrenica and the UK, youth centre job sharing programmes, dance courses, festivals, support for University and college scholarships, mentoring, ongoing workshops which have included Parkour, Forum Theatre, the uses of Music for those with physical or emotional concerns and live performance⁴. Currently their work is mainly focused on The Complete Freedom of Truth⁵ project, an international youth-led project aimed at building global youth citizenship through arts and culture and the Four Towns Youth Initiative that brings together young people from four towns in

BiH.

Tina Ellen Lee, director of Opera Circus UK, argues that the arts are effective in settings like Srebrenica because they are the ultimate form of communication enabling people to share without words and on a different level acting as a catalyst to tolerance and understanding: "It is a form of communication that goes to the brain and to the heart at the same time. Too often the heart is left out of the equation" (T.E. Lee, interview, 2017). A young participant in Srebrenica explains that it is not just about doing art to be artists but instead about building core human values.

"We are not doing this work because we want children to be actors or dancers. We are doing it so that children become good people and in the future good parents." (Srebrenica Children's Music Theatre participant⁶)

Resiting and challenging reconciliation

Interest in reconciliation has exploded in recent decades but what the term has gained in terms of popular usage it seems to have lost in definitional value (Lederach & Lederach 2010). Reconciliation has increasingly emerged as a political category and buzzword, adopted by politicians, absorbed into institutional discourse and circulated by the media.

⁴<http://www.operacircusuk.com/bosnia-and-herzegovina--children-and-young-people--arts-and-culture.html>

⁵Quote taken from an interview with a young participant of Srebrenica Children's Music Theatre in the film Candles

⁶Against the Night (Davos special edit 2011), directed by Robert Golden. Available here: <https://vimeo.com/38859759>

However, despite its ubiquity there is little shared understanding of what it means and consists of. Crocker refers to various meanings that range from 'thicker' to 'thinner' conceptions of the term (1999). In its most basic reiteration, reconciliation involves a form of co-existence where former enemies comply with the law and learn to live together without violating each other and in its more ambitious forms a way that people not only live alongside each other but also respect and engage with each other as fellow citizens. Recent years have seen a burgeoning of programs and initiatives that purport to pursue and deliver reconciliation, to the point that it has become one of the top four international funding categories (Smith 2004). However, the wide-ranging application and political manipulation of the term means that many initiatives that claim to be about reconciliation are only loosely tied to 'thinner' notions of the term.

While arts practitioners often have to define their work in terms of how it enables and achieves reconciliation to secure funding, at a community and practice level, reconciliation discourse is deeply problematic and contested. The arts practitioners interviewed for this research actively avoided using the term with communities whom resist, reject and challenge the term. Community level suspicion has made reconciliation discourse redundant for community based arts practitioners who seek to define their other frameworks and values.

Pervanic's support from teachers was crucial to getting Most Mira off the ground. 'I never said (to them) it was about reconciliation but they both understood that it was' (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview). He purposefully steered away from using the term which is a highly

politicised in the communities where Most Mira works. "It was too sensitive to talk about making peace and reconciling. People were so badly conditioned that they felt safer in their own group. Trying to reach out to people from another group involved a lot of hostility. Hostilities ended in 1995 but the war has actually never ended... People are afraid of making peace" (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview)

In this precarious environment Most Mira make sure that their activities are dissociated from politics. If they used the language of reconciliation community members would assume Most Mira was a political organisation and they would alienate themselves from the very people they are looking to engage and build trust with. Pervanic says even now Most Mira is established in the community, they rarely use the term but he has realised that he can talk about it using other words. "You can start this process (of reconciliation) and you can run it successfully without talking about it" (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview).

In Srebrenica, people are also cynical and distrustful of the discourse of reconciliation. Lee describes a situation where people in the community feel that projects, and by association 'reconciliation', have been imposed on them by large international organisations who have failed to find out or listen to what they want or need (T.E.Lee, interview, 2017). The community feel condescended to and are resentful of initiatives that seek to impose imported versions of what reconciliation does and does not consist of. The assumption underpinning these top-down projects are that local people are not capable of driving their own reconciliation;

that they are not worth listening to.

Lee says there is a generation of young people who refuse to engage with peace and reconciliation projects or funding offers. These young people say they “do not need to be told how to make peace” (T.E.Lee, interview, 2017). They want to define projects on their own terms. They want to do arts projects that are not overly focused on ethnicity and religion but that think about difference in a more expansive way. They want to do projects that are inclusive of every- body, that work not only with all ethnic groups but also with minorities and disabled groups.

There is a standardised post-conflict arts for reconciliation model that designates projects must consist of equal numbers of people from the different conflicted groups coming together to deliver some kind of collaborative cultural production. Thompson labels a disease suffered by such arts projects as ‘Romeo and Juliet-ism’; where they take the narrative of Romeo and Juliet and seek to create a happy ending for the two warring parties (Thompson 2013). However this repeated narrative can serve to re-confirm and maintain existing community divisions at the same time as ignoring other important divisions that need exploring. The young people in Srebrenica seem to recognise this. They have sought to define their work not through the singular lens of reconciling ethnic division but are looking to tackle inclusion in a broader sense by inviting disabled young people to also participate. Lee describes how when arts work models the inclusive society in which people would like to live then the issue around ethnic difference, around who is Serb and who is Bosniack, actually disappear (T.E.Lee, interview, 2017).

Reconciliation as implicit not explicit

Both Lee and Pervanic describe reconciliation as an implicit rather than explicit outcome of the arts. When reconciliation is understood as a process by which people exchange ideas, engage in dialogue and build relations then participatory arts is its obvious bedfellow. Lee argues that the arts provide a structure and a space that you invite people into and that from these encounters things start to emerge naturally, if people are interested and engaged (T.E.Lee, interview, 2017). In community settings where the rhetoric of reconciliation is not trusted, an explicit agenda around reconciliation only serves to alienate people and undermine the potential impact of the arts. From this perspective reconciliation is a by-product of the arts, not a given or definitive outcome but a distinct possibility. When reconciliation is made explicit as an agenda with communities suspicious of a project’s intentions, it only serves to undermine its actuality.

Despite the wide-ranging interpretations and literature on the concept of reconciliation there appear to be two broad points of consensus: that reconciliation ‘begins from and solidifies around a relational focus’ encapsulated in the metaphor of an encounter where people meet and exchange and that reconciliation is a process (Lederach & Lederach 2010:5). Within the arts different artistic approaches place emphasis on distinct aspects of either the artistic process or artistic end product. Participatory arts with its primary focus on the quality of the artistic process and the dialogical and relational aspects of that process shares key qualities with the concept of reconciliation. Lee is clear that their work with the young people of Srebrenica is about the learning and conversations that

happens between each other as part of the creative process rather than about the final artistic output. This is work that is emergent, reconciliation can be the implied intention but it cannot be explicitly assumed. Doing so denies the agency of a community to define their own version of reconciliation.

Arts practitioner's descriptions echo ideas of elicitive approaches to peace-building in which community participants are valued as key resources not recipients and their cultural knowledge is viewed as the foundation upon which peace-building is grounded (Lederach 1995). Here the peace practitioner is viewed as a facilitator and catalyst rather than expert, responsive to the culture in which they are working they provide a participatory, dialogical process for relationship building and decision-making. It is an environment where 'everyone teaches and learns; learners experiences and concerns are valued; there is a high level of interactive participation; people co- create knowledge and engage in critical reflection' (Shank & Schirch 2008:11). Elicitive approaches are contrasted with prescriptive approaches that generally assume universal models of peace-building and conflict resolution that are then applied or adapted to particular cultural situations (Young 1998). Participatory arts practitioners whose work is embedded in emergent processes often find themselves at odds with prescriptive ways of working in which content and outcomes are largely pre-defined and explicit.

Reconciliation as long-term engagement

Both projects, in their various iterations, have been running a decade and the central importance of this long-term engagement cannot be understated. Lee realised

early on that in order to be trusted by a post traumatised community you have to keep coming back. The people of Srebrenica have watched organisations come and go, witnessed ill-thought out projects falter and experts parachute in. The director of a youth centre warned Lee when they first started working in the town that they could not do a project, then leave and expect to have any kind of credibility within the community, "if you keep coming back then we know that you care and we need to know that people care about us" (T.E.Lee, interview, 2017). Only a small handful of people keep coming back to Srebrenica.

Pervanic argues "it takes a long time to change people's mentality" (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview). After 10 years they have seen significant changes, previously different members of the community never would have come together to watch a theatre performance for example, but he emphasises how uncertain their work is. Outcomes are not a given, success cannot be guaranteed. The international community in their rush to find and achieve reconciliation, often fund projects too early, before people are ready (Thompson 2013) and do not consider the importance of working slowly overtime.

With funding cycles and calls primarily structured around short-term projects that can demonstrate immediate outcomes Pervanic believes funders fail to understand Most Mira's approach and values. "If they (funders) ask me, 'How do you know that you'll make any kind of difference?' I say, 'I don't know. I will know in 10 or 15 years time. Most funders are not patient enough to wait for 10 or 15 years.'" (K.Pervanic, 2017, interview). Having to quantify their achievements

in terms of quantifiable short-term results not only misconstrues and misrepresents the whole purpose of this form of long-term participatory arts work but serves to impede its potential effects.

In recent years Most Mira have found a funder who understand that their work takes time and who say that they are not interested in numbers. Opera Circus UK have become adept at navigating funding opportunities and packing a considerable amount into the project funding they receive. Fighting against the tendency to define the arts in terms of singular interventions, both projects demonstrate that the contribution of the arts to reconciliation is not finite and temporal but rather one element in of an undertaking that can only succeed over time. Lee explains,

“the arts are about a process, not the final production—the final act is important, it builds confidence, it elates and celebrates but that wasn’t the work that was just the finale. It is the process that needs to be commissioned – not the product” (T.E.Lee, interview, 2017).

Both Pervanic and Lee, after 10 years, have noticed the ripple effects of their work within the respective communities. Young people going on to work in and study the arts at university, other arts and youth-led initiatives springing up in the form of theatre groups, arts workshops for disabled children and cultural festivals. Driven by young people who have participated in the activities of Most Mira and Srebrenica Children’s Theatre the arts have made a deep impression and are now part of their lives of the participants and their communities

Conclusion

Funding for participatory arts is unstable and rarely long-term and such an environment places considerable limits on its potential as a tool for peace-building and reconciliation. There needs to be a considerable shift in how participatory arts are valued and understood. When the focus is on the relational and dialogical process that the arts enables over time and on the values underpinning and implicit to the participatory artistic process rather than on an explicit reconciliation agenda then the contribution that community arts can make to peace-building comes into clearer focus. For many communities who have lived with conflict and war the term ‘reconciliation’ is deeply problematic or over-used and corrupted to point that it is no longer trusted. As such it has become redundant as a framework around which to define and frame projects.

Lederach and Lederach urge that the discussion of reconciliation is narrowed to a focal point that takes seriously the lived experience of local communities and their inevitable need to survive, to locate individual and collective voice and to make and negotiate meaning in contexts of violence (2010). Participatory arts can create opportunities for this form of community driven and embodied reconciliation, supporting them to create possibilities and negotiate their own definitions and parameters for what reconciliation means in their localised contents and histories. Distinct from arts that facilitates ‘thin’ or politically expedient notions of reconciliation, this form of arts work is crucial to building long-term peace.

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