

MANIFESTO FOR COMMUNITY ARTS

Art is a necessary tool for addressing social injustice in America.

Community arts seeks to make visible or ameliorate social injustice. But the work of community arts is not separate from systems of privilege, access, and oppression. We labor for social change while also working inextricably within these power structures. This is a reality we must embrace and not ignore as a condition of our work. This produces a tension that we must talk about.

Friction produces fire.

We are dependent on the systems in which we labor and those systems are not made to accommodate friction. Too many community arts projects are forced to avoid friction. The success of a project becomes necessary for garnering support for future work. Projects are squeezed into academic and fiscal calendars that do not fit the scope of the work. Images are chosen to represent the work so it can be summarized and understood as good. We recognize the archetypes which can represent that good work: romantic images of small smiling faces, safe in art class; the persevering march of survivors; incarcerated people reaching beyond the walls that surround them; the mural that brightens up the blight-ridden neighborhood. The images, the summary, the very desire for the work often silences the messiness of what actually happens both in the projects and through the tensions they carry.

This is a call to action. We will burn our hands as we work.

We have power. As those involved in community arts, regardless of our role, we have control over what we talk about and how we talk about it. We can be aware of how our actions function. We can acknowledge the struggle, the friction, and the tensions that community arts illuminates. We can choose different images to represent the work; we can replace small smiling faces with working hands. We can seek an understanding from the work that is not easily summarized. We can refuse to let it be coded or palatable. We can recognize the very systems within which we work and from which we seek to be free. This approach to community arts is one that is direct and not neatly packaged. That is its strength and beauty. We can use art to help us grapple with social injustice: not as an emancipatory savior, but as a tool of resistance.