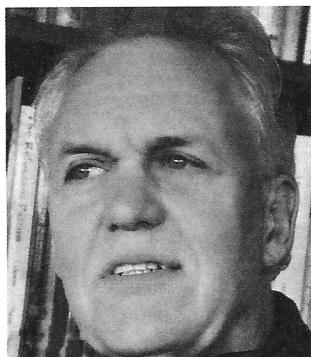


Bravo, Sort Of

Public art, language, and accountability

BY WILLIAM CLEVELAND



Twenty-four years ago I wrote an article to argue that the arts community in the United States was a co-conspirator in its own marginalization. I was referring to the need for arts sector advocates to examine and question the often-disaffecting language we use to communicate about our work. I would like to say that we've come a long way since then and that this problem is no longer a concern. Unfortun-

nately, I think it still is—particularly when it comes to the way we communicate about public art.

There was a time, not long ago, when *public art* meant monuments, statues, and sculptures. The good news is that we've moved beyond the narrow constraints that used to tyrannize the field—way beyond. A quick review of the articles in *Public Art Review* issues in recent years provides an interesting picture of the evolving public art landscape. Topics have included spirituality, parks and rec, foodways, placemaking, healing, the environment, the artist as community leader, and the dissolving boundaries between live performance and figurative sculpture. From my perspective, this expanded territory is thrilling evidence of an increasingly adventurous and healthy cultural ecosystem.

The downside, though (and you knew there would be one), is the unfortunate proliferation of terminology that has emerged to describe and, in some cases, colonize these new territories.

I should probably acknowledge that my reflections here are skewed by 30 years of working as a writer/musician, educator, and researcher in service to what used to be called *community arts*, and which I see as having much in common with significant aspects of the current public arts field.

So why am I so focused on language? As an arts educator and researcher, I feel I should be familiar with the vocabulary being used to define cultural practice within and outside of the United States. I also think it's important to examine how this language reflects the social, political, and economic forces that are influencing public attitudes toward the cultural community, as well as the field's understanding of itself in that context. With this in mind, I've made a point of collecting and "naming the names," so to speak, that are showing up in our ever-mutating dictionary of American culture. Here is a current batch of labels that I see as positioned in or near the neighborhoods of cultural practice occupied by public art: *Community arts*, *public art*, *creative placemaking*, *community cultural development*, *socially engaged practice*, *arts-based community development*, *cultural animation*, *art for social change*, *cultural*

community building, *cultural mediation*.

This proliferation of terms can be seen as a symptom of a good thing—namely, an increased interest and investment in cultural work that in some way engages the public sphere. I also see it as an indicator that a realm of contemporary artistic practice that, not too long ago, was considered obscure and second rate has now been embraced, validated, elevated, romanticized (and in some cases sanitized) in a wide variety of ways by people and institutions representing a diversity of perspectives and interests.

So, bravo! Sort of.

From my perspective, though, this terminology is also an expression of the worst kind of inside game—a parochial brand of discourse that arts folks fall prey to when they're trying to position themselves as the next big thing, and they think nobody outside the cultural cloister is listening. Haven't we learned the hard way that, in our media-saturated world, there is no longer such a thing as a private conversation—and, surprise, surprise, that the way we communicate about art is often more impactful than the art itself?

There are of course many other terms that could be included in this brief glossary. As a teacher, I'm trying to provide my students (and myself) with tools for navigating these increasingly muddled waters. I think anybody working in this salad mix of a field needs to know what's in the mix and be aware that Boston lettuce to one person is Bibb to another. But while these small differences can be helpful to those inside the work, for society at large they only serve to obfuscate and confuse.

I have a particularly low tolerance for a sobriquet like *socially engaged practice* and its little brother *social practice* because, absent any reference to the arts, such terms are indecipherable for people who live outside of the monastery grounds. They obscure rather than clarify. *Creative placemaking*, the current favorite, is another case in point. What started out as a fairly narrowly defined realm of cultural practice with specific economic and social objectives has morphed into a foggy catchall that many artists and funders seem to be chasing with their hands out and their eyes closed.

Posing questions about this vague nomenclature is particularly relevant when it comes to who is paying the bills. How does the proliferation and, in some cases, misuse of language affect the perception of, and investment in, the work? The resources for these projects inevitably get attached to these terms, and the institutions supporting the work offer ambiguous (and sometimes competing) definitions of terms like *creative placemaking*. In our work at the Center for the Study of Art & Community (CSA&C) we've found that this lack of clarity often migrates to the work and negatively impacts the communities involved.

What's most troubling about this semantic haze are the moral and ethical questions that emerge. Terms like *social practice*, *placemaking*, or *community cultural development* all imply community

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involvement of some kind. Yet I see very little attention paid to what exactly that means. How are the people who will bear the consequences of a project's success or failure going to be engaged? If some public benefit is part of the deal, is there any accountability built in? And when the curtain closes, who will be there to either sustain the good work—or pick up the pieces?

In our work at the CSA&C we take these questions very seriously. We also understand that the fuzzy communication that prompts them is not going to dissipate any time soon. So we try to focus on what is actually happening in the communities involved instead of the words used to describe it. I certainly don't begrudge artists following their muse. And if their only objective is to make a splash in the art world, the fickle filter of critics, markets, and public taste will decide. But when an artist or arts organization is also looking to

make a positive community impact, then the definitions of success are much more complicated, and the folks whose lives are affected need to be in the mix.

We have found that the best way to give good intentions a chance of becoming truly good work is for collaborators to maintain a rigorous commitment to three simple things: clarity of intention, accurate documentation and sharing of outcomes, and ultimate accountability to the community. Adhering to these touchstones has helped align words and deeds in a way that both respects and affirms the values and aspirations of all involved.

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