

Report on the Thousand Kites Project's Artography Grant

By Mark Valdez

Methodology and Notes

The report draws on field notes and interviews held between March 17 and 20, 2007, with Appalshop staff members, and community and professional participants in and around Appalshop's office in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Community interviews referenced in the Introduction took place at the home of Bill and Essie Gray and were part of an informal discussion while they awaited formal interviews with Arlene Goldbard. In addition, the report pulls information from the site visits conducted by Edwin Torres and Vanessa Whang written for Artography, the Appalshop website and the websites for H2H and Roadside Theater.

The titles for each section are taken from terms and phrases used by the project staff members and by Appalshop employees. The titles are meant to evoke organization nomenclature and although they are related to the subject they introduce, they are not intended as a summation or explanation of the material they introduce.

All parties interviewed were given copies of the report prior to its final form for corrections, clarifications and input.

Introduction

"Prisons are like Wal-Mart, they want one on every corner and no competition."

That's Jewel Miller, speaking. A hard-core critic of the justice system, she is a member of Lebanon C.U.R.E. (Citizens United for Rehabilitation of Errants), a local chapter of the national grassroots organization aimed at reforming the criminal justice system.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, what Ms. Miller is saying doesn't feel far from the truth. The most recent statistics on the prison population indicate that, "between yearend 1995 and yearend 2005, the incarcerated population grew an average 3.3% annually. At yearend 2005, over 7 million people were on probation, in jail or prison, or on parole -- 3.2% of all U.S. adult residents, or 1 in every 32 adults."¹

I met Ms. Miller and four other members of C.U.R.E. on a cold, windy Sunday afternoon in the time between morning and evening church services. We are gathered at the home of Bill and Elsie Gray, a warm, inviting sanctuary crafted from two doublewide trailers joined together. Elsie greets us at the door and as we're ushered in, she offers us a glass of 7-Up. Their house looks very much like those of my relatives and neighbors, growing up: modest, clean, welcoming. The walls, shelves and tables communicate their faith: a

plaque with the Ten Commandments, a crucifix, Jesus figurines, a picture inscribed with Psalms 23, “The Lord is my shepherd...”

What stands out most about all of this—this meeting, these people, this place—is how average, ordinary, in fact, it all is. More Norman Rockwell than Emma Goldman.

These accidental activists (they could not have ever imagined themselves as warriors in the fight for prison reform) had no intention of charting this course. They are grandparents, parents, working class, religious, White Americans. Like most of us, they saw prisons as a place for rapists and murderers. So when their loved ones landed in jail, they were completely shocked. Faced with maneuvering the legal system, they came to discover exactly how unjust our justice system really is.

“People think that the taxpayers are paying for everything, for their TV’s, for their food. We do it. We sent the money. It’s the families who do this,” says Elsie Gray, her gentle face, hardening. Elsie and Bill’s son is currently in prison for selling drugs. When the police arrived on routine drug bust, he was found in possession of three oxycontin pills and a small amount of cocaine. For this first-time offense, he was sentenced to eighteen years in prison, followed by ten years probation. He maintains he was there to purchase drugs, not to sell them. Because Virginia is a no-parole state, he must serve his entire sentence.

“People don’t believe me when I tell them [my son] got so much time for such a small thing,” Mrs. Gray adds. “We met with one of the state representatives and he said, ‘well he must have done something else if he got such a long sentence.’ He wouldn’t believe me.”

“Each month prisoners are given one cake of soap and one roll of toilet paper. Anything beyond that, they have to purchase in the commissary. And since the food in prisons is very bad and not very healthy, they buy their own food so they don’t have to eat what they get served. Just this past year, food prices went up three times,” says Elsie.

They seize every opportunity to tell their story, in the hope of transforming the listeners’ outrage into activism.

On this particular Sunday, they have gathered to meet with Arlene Goldbard, a writer and activist documenting *Thousand Kites*, a project whose goal is to reform the U.S. criminal-justice system. The project is spearheaded by Holler to the Hood and Roadside Theater, two programs of Appalshop, a multi-media center headquartered in Whitesburg, KY, an hours drive from where we are. I come along in hopes of informal conversation with the participants in between their sessions with Arlene. The people gathered here participated in story circles, contributing to the creation of a new play exploring the impact of prisons and the prison industry on the lives of prisoners, Corrections Officers and their families.

The play is just one part of a multi-disciplinary strategy that includes theater, film, music and the Internet. At the heart of the project—the very thing that bridges the disciplines and defines the work—is storytelling.

The power of testimony and witnessing is not lost on the *Thousand Kites* artistic team. It's at the very core of Appalshop's mission, and it lives in the hearts of those doing the work. As they will tell you, "communication is the means and the end of the project."

This report examines the *Thousand Kites* collaboration between Holler to the Hood and Roadside Theater. Starting with a radio program, expanding to a film, and now a theater piece, the next step for the project is a web-based viral media campaign to reach an even broader audience.

This juxtaposition of innovation and tradition is one of the most striking aspects of this story as it also serves to underscore an internal shift occurring within the organization. Founded in the 1960's, there is a generational shift taking place among staff members as a new crop of artist/activists arrives at Appalshop to advance the work. Some of them are the children of the founding members, while others come here because of shared values and a belief in the mission. And they are bringing to the company new communication and media strategies mostly involving digital and web-based media.

Knowing that the organization must adapt to changes in technology and personnel, Appalshop is using *Thousand Kites* to develop and test new a new model for artistic production and cultural organizing that is based on inter-generational collaboration using new technologies.

What follows is a story of this collaboration; of Appalshop and it's programs, as well as the tale of the prison economy that brought *Thousand Kites* into being.

My thanks to all of those who shared their time and experiences and feedback.

"New Economy"

The times they are a changin'. In a tour of the coalfields of Appalachia, where Appalshop is headquartered, the role of coal mining on the local economy is evident—mostly by way of vacant mines and the abandoned transport systems suspended over roads and hills like dried up waterslides. As mining companies adopted new methods of production—automation and surface or "strip" mining—the number of jobs available to local residents diminished. One of the biggest blows to the economy in recent times came from Westmoreland Mining who closed operations in 1997. At one time the largest employer in the region, the number of workers had diminished to 700 by the time the company shut down. In this instance, there was no warning. Workers arrived to work one morning to find a notice informing them that the company was folding. It was devastating—to families and to the economy. Now, as you drive through nearby towns like Neon and Deane, you are likely to see as many abandoned houses, as you are inhabited ones. Downtown commercial districts look like ghost towns; the buildings crumbling from years of neglect.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, one third of Appalachia's population, which

is 97% white, is living below the federal poverty line. The unemployment rate is 54.8%, while 30% of the population was classified disabled. In Appalshop's home county, half the public school students are considered economically deprived and the adult literacy rate is 50%.

Despite these statistics one of the nation's leading multi-media arts and culture organization has been flourishing here for nearly four decades. Appalshop was founded in 1969 when a group of aspiring young artist-activists secured funding from the Johnson Administration's War on Poverty to help their working-class and poor neighbors grapple with the causes and effects of their region's poverty. As envisioned by the government, the idea was to recruit a group of Appalachian youth and train them in media skills with the expectation that they would use their new skills as a way to escape the region. Instead, the trainees saw their media knowledge as a way to stay in Appalachia. When they looked at the ways their home communities were portrayed through existing media, they saw little or nothing that reflected the reality they knew; so they made films to document their own communities and experiences. Arlene Goldbard, Roadside Theater and *Thousand Kites* partner, described some of the circumstances of Appalshop's founding, explaining that the Federal Office of Economic Opportunity and the American Film Institute funded media training programs to prepare youth for work in the media industry. Appalshop was the only white, rural participant—most of the others were black organizations located in urban areas. “This expressed the solidarity the founders perceived: just as with the civil rights movements of that time, they saw that Appalachians had a cultural identity to preserve. This multi-disciplinary organization has used radio, TV, film, photography, music and theater to conserve and convey the rich culture of the region to people within the region and to the wider world.” When asked about through lines in this diverse work, she stressed valuing continuity, craft and accessibility, as well as the primacy of first-person story.

Over the next decade, these young artists worked with Appalachian residents to create documentary films, plays, print publications, and audio recordings that explored environmental devastation, inadequate housing, poor health care, sub-standard education, and low personal self-esteem (a poverty of pride) caused, in large measure, by the ownership of Appalachia's wealth—it's land and resources—by absentee energy conglomerates. They spurred citizen participation, political action, and economic development that benefited multiple mountain communities in eastern Kentucky, southwestern Virginia, southern West Virginia, and Tennessee. The underlying philosophy has always been that Appalachian people must tell their own stories and solve their own problems.ⁱⁱ

Within the landscape of multi-media arts organizations, Appalshop is somewhat of an anomaly. First of all, the breadth of disciplines they cover is larger than most: radio, film, video, music, youth media, theater and the Internet. Not only that, within the organization, each of these disciplines are equally advanced in their development. Also, they are unique in their location (rural Appalachia) and in their longevity (nearly four decades in operation). Of the dozen cohorts funded by the Office of Economic

Opportunity, Appalshop is the only one that is still operating; the others folded shortly after the federal funds ceased.

At present, Appalshop hosts twelve different projects, ranging from film and television production, to a recording label and radio station, to theater, youth media and multi-media programs. Projects must raise their own money, with a percentage of the funds raised going to a general account that benefits all the projects. Because of this, most areas tend to operate independently of each other. Collaborations most often occur with outside groups, such as Roadside's project with the Zuni Native Americans.

The programs each enjoy a distinct and renowned history. June Appal Recordings, for instance, has captured some of the finest musicians—local and national—in music history. The documentary films shot and produced by Appalshop Films and Headwaters Television have documented the Appalachian experience and have won numerous awards. Newer projects, such as Holler to the Hood and the Appalachian Media Institute draw heavily on new media such as digital production and Internet. Regardless the medium, the aim is always the same: local cultures telling their own stories and listening to the unique stories of others.

Given the advancements and changes that the moving media field has weathered in the past thirty years, Appalshop's survival is even more remarkable. When they began their operations, they could generate enough income from the sale and rental of 16mm films to survive and expand. However, with the advent of home video, filmmakers and distributors took a heavy economic blow, as they had to switch formats to the less lucrative VHS. Now, with the capabilities of DVD and the Internet, independent producers and small organizations like Appalshop must once again chart new paths to survival. Herein lies a core company asset: adaptability.

Between 1900-1950, the population in the region skyrocketed as African Americans and southern Europeans arrived to work in the booming coal industry. After 1950, when the boom went bust, Appalachia suffered the largest single out-migration in the nation's history; between 1950-1965, three million people left to build automobiles in Michigan or to fill factory jobs in Chicago, Baltimore, or Cleveland.ⁱⁱⁱ

Today high unemployment rates persist, resulting in equally high poverty rates. There is a large segment of the population who live on social security or social security disability, the result of on-the-job injuries or black lung. Many of the young people who can leave here do, and of those who stay behind, many turn to drugs as an alternative way of escaping.

In the wake of diminishing mining production and the corresponding economic downturn, the residents of the area were eager for new employment opportunities. Enter the Big Stone Gap Housing Authority, which manages the town's subsidized public housing projects and built and owns the state-of-the-art Wallens Ridge supermaximum prison through a 20-year lease/purchase agreement with the Commonwealth of Virginia.

When it opened, the \$75 million facility anticipated a payroll of approximately \$13.5 million per year. At the 1999 prison opening, then-Governor Jim Gilmore proclaimed, "This innovative prison facility will mean more than 400 new jobs...that will benefit the economy of Southwest Virginia. Not only will this state prison help the local economy, it will keep the people of Virginia safe from violent criminals."^{iv}

Presently there are eight prisons in Appalshop's vicinity. While there is no denying the positive economic impact the correctional facilities have had on the region and the state, since that opening day the realities of the prison industry have started to hit. In an article for the *Hartford Courant*, Edward Fitzpatrick writes, "officials have created the kind of dangerous dynamic often seen in rural prisons, where job-starved people with little experience are given guns, badges and authority over inner-city inmates from different races and cultures. The result can be abuse of power."^v

Allegations of prisoner abuse have been increasingly reported and stories of ongoing racial tensions continue to surface. While the deaths of several inmates continue to raise concerns for family members and human rights watchgroups.

In this complex, new economy where state income is generated on the transfer of prisoners from out-of-state, overcrowded corrections facilities, the community is indeed changing. The new prison population and the new industry beg for a re-examination of issues regarding race, justice, money, and ultimately, for a reconsideration of how the community wants to develop.

"Where the rubber meets the road"

Thousand Kites is a multidisciplinary collaboration between Holler to the Hood (H2H) and Roadside Theater (RST), two of Appalshop's projects.

A relatively new program within the organization, H2H co-director Nick Szuberla describes the origins: "I volunteered as one of the 50 community D.J.s on Appalshop's radio station. We played hip-hop and soon began receiving mail from an audience no one at the station knew was listening: African-American inmates in the new super maximum-security prisons. The inmates wrote to us about loneliness and human rights abuses. Every Monday night for 3 hours, we opened up the airwaves to their loved ones – and that program became Holler to the Hood."

H2H is "a multi-media human rights project designed to foster collaboration and communication between urban and rural communities. The project was initiated by Appalshop artists in response to the growing prison boom in the economically distressed central Appalachian coalfields. We believe in the power of art to speak boldly for human rights and positive social change in our community."^{vi}

RST is an established institution within Appalshop. A leader within the community-based theater movement with a distinguished national profile, "Roadside Theater is creating a body of drama based on the history and lives of Appalachian people and

collaborating with others nationally who are dramatizing their local life. For Roadside, the purpose of theater is to increase our understanding of ourselves and our empathy for others.”^{vii}

“*Thousand Kites* examines the shift in demographics in our backyard,” explains Cocke. “Our purpose is to reform the U.S. criminal justice system. To do this, those most affected by the prison problem need to be the ones leading the reform effort. Our focus is not directly on policy, but on experiences of prisoners, guards and their families and how to connect ordinary people to those experiences. We believe that when enough people viscerally understand what is happening – how wrong the U.S. criminal justice system has gone – they will demand policy change.”

The *Thousand Kites* project grew out of the H2H radio program and from a documentary film produced and directed by Kirby and Szuberla entitled *Up the Ridge* that explored the prison industry and the real-life impact of moving inner-city, minority prisoners to rural prisons. The film contains interviews with ex-prisoners, as well as the families of prisoners, including the relatives of David Tracy and Lawrence Frazier, two prisoners who died inside of Wallens Ridge, causing an uproar in their home state of Connecticut, where they were from.

Szuberla explains, “What convinced us was the four different letters describing an older prisoner getting beat up. Along with prisoners and their families, we contacted Human Rights Watch and they came in to investigate. Plus, this is our new constituency, our new community members. Just because you can’t come to the door doesn’t mean you’re not part of the community.”

Amelia Kirby, H2H’s other Co-Director, who grew up in the area, adds, “My initial response was almost a defensive reaction that my community couldn’t be perpetuating these actions, but enough prisoners write to tell you about how they’re being abused, you can’t deny it.”

The word “kite” is a prison term that means “letter” or “note.” The *kites* received by H2H provided the impetus for the radio program and the subsequent film, *Up the Ridge*.

Thousand Kites has multiple components: theater, film, radio, Internet. In fact, the innovation of the project comes from the multiple modes of presentation. “It’s kind of like a hypertext to receive this,” explains Goldbard. “It’s available at the same time for different audiences on different modes, and it’s possible to mix elements, to combine it to create new things. There are multiple cuts of everything for all the different purposes, in the spirit of accessibility”

“Early on,” says Szuberla, “there was a woman from Michigan who heard the show online. She contacted us saying she wanted to do something to help so we said, ‘Why don’t you contact your local radio station and get them to air the show.’ She got it on 3 community radio stations and then called back and said, ‘What else can I do?’ So we sent her an excerpt of the film along with discussion points so she could host a house party to share the information. Her interest was real and specific—a real desire to help.”

As their audience began to build and expand, Szuberla and Kirby realized they needed to expand the ways they could engage their constituents—so they enlisted the help of their Appalshop colleagues, Roadside Theater.

“What prompted the collaboration is that we kept hearing from our constituents, ‘we want more.’ The play is an example of our recognizing that electronic media is not sufficient; live interaction among stakeholders is critical to connecting to the prison story. We needed a low-threshold medium, and the written word is accessible to all—we can translate it to Spanish, mail it to prisoners, we can print it out or email it. The prisoners operate within the word and the play includes passages from letters we get. It’s an organic way to amplify the voices, and it lets others participate in a more interactive way. With the film or the radio, it’s us doing it. But with the play, they are the ones reading it, rehearsing it, and staging it.”

“Communication is the means and the end.”

There are two mantras that you hear repeatedly when speaking with the artistic team of *Thousand Kites*: “Communication is the means and the end of the project” and, “Those with the problem are the ones that need to be the ones to enact a solution.”

In this respect, the first person voice was paramount to the development the project. *Thousand Kites* playwright and RST member Donna Porterfield explains the process of creating the play:

I conducted story circles and interviews with people working in prisons, with families of prisoners, families of people working in prisons, and with people impacted by the prisons because they are living in the area. There are 4 prisons in Wise County alone. Two are Super Max. Most of the story circles included 20-30 participants, and we used many letters, songs, raps, and poems written by prisoners, sent to Holler to the Hood through their weekly radio program.

The most difficult folks to hear from were Corrections Officers (CO’s). Many of them feel their jobs could be threatened if they speak publicly of their experiences. And since jobs here are hard to come by, this is a valid concern. Nonetheless, I did speak with some CO’s, as well as former CO’S.

Within the play, the people interviewed are not identified by name. They are called “Prisoner” or “Guard” or “Chorus.” The words they speak, however, are the first person words taken from interviews or extracted from letters.

Goldbard adds, “The prisoners are represented through their letters. They tell their stories, share their wisdom of what they’ve learned; they share their poems. Some of the letters detail abuses, some describe their lives and conditions, and some are drawings, poems and stories, many with a quality of sweetness you might associate with a young person. The need to express yourself is urgent. They have nothing to do all day, so

they express themselves through writing, through art on envelopes, always in the best way they can.”

She adds, “When there is a reading of the play we actively solicit feedback—and [the audience] tell us their own stories brought to light by the play. Some comment on what they think is true or not. At the readings we have the voices of artists, activists, former prisoners, Corrections Officers, their families—they all respond to the play and they give us their feedback.”

There are no performance royalties for the play, and it is written so that any community can perform it. They can play all the parts. The structure is comprised of two acts: the first act is the story (the text of the play) the second act invites the testimony of the audience (their own stories). The final component of the event solicits and identifies next steps participants can take to take action.

As an organizing and advocacy tool the play inspires a sense of agency from the audience; it can activate a desire and capacity to make a difference. The three-part structure of the event is positioned to build on itself. The first step provides information and sets up the issues through the storytelling. The second step asks the audience to position themselves within the narrative, so that they automatically become a part of the story and thus invested in the outcome. The final step instigates involvement, via intentional action. The participants are given the tools to exercise a choice to make a difference.

“The audience for this work can be thought of as a series of concentric circles,” says Goldbard. “There is the circle of people directly in prison, their families, those who work there, who helped build the prison or stock or service it, those who work in the criminal justice system, plus the people who are working for prison reform, and everyone that these people know. As the circle widens, it touches almost everyone. Almost everyone is involved in the prison-industrial complex.”

“Iteration”

“*Thousand Kites* combines shared values and aesthetics,” explains Goldbard. “Appalshop values continuity, craft, accessibility and they have a strong interest in story. For *Roadside*, it’s about accessibility, they are interested in story, and who is telling it. As for *Holler to the Hood*, the primary drive is to be a resonant with the work and the zeitgeist. They are following community interest.”

Examining the artistic forms of the project, Goldbard asserts “form and content are one; how they tell the story mirrors the values inherent in the story.”

The play *Thousand Kites* is written to be performed anywhere by anyone, with the expressed desire that it will continue to change, to adapt to the needs of those presenting it. On their website, visitors can add their stories to the script or comment on what’s been written, or they can call a toll-free number where they can record their stories. This

living document aims at getting at the true story (acknowledging the subjective reality). Cocke adds, “Verisimilitude is primary. We look for people who are inside to say, ‘yes, this is real.’”

The play is set “here and now.” A staging notes suggests, “Guard and Prisoner place themselves on their respective platforms (or in their respective taped boxes) which they do not leave. They do not acknowledge each other, or the Chorus, and speak directly to the audience.”

“The Chorus is free to move about the stage, but cannot enter the Guard’s or Prisoner’s space. They speak directly to each other and to the audience and indirectly to Prisoner and Guard.”

As written, the prisoner and the guard stand still—they are each trapped, immobile. Only the chorus, representing the public, can move. There is a combination of movement and stasis to signify the stationary prison life. There is a lot of overlapping dialogue—it’s harmony and discord. The spoken words are first person/reflective.

The play does not ask for, nor does it require, elaborate sets. Taped outlines and platforms are the only scenic elements. The production does not seek to hide its mechanisms and there is no fourth wall.

Given the primacy of first voice, I ask Mr. Cocke about the role of the playwright and editor, as it seems to me that they can be seen as *de facto* narrators, perhaps compromising the integrity of the first voice, since they chose and shape the stories that are told and the way they are told. He responds, “That’s true, but then Act 2 allows for a revision of that narration through the stories that get told by the audience. Also, through the process of reflection and discussion, we adjust the script. So far we’ve heard that we need to add women prisoners’ voices, that we need to better represent the C.O. dilemma, and that we need to add the voices of the victims. So we say to our audience, how can you help us amplify that?”

“Data-base driven”

Unlike talk-radio and television, both strongholds of right-wing conservative programming where the few broadcast to the many, sanctioned by corporations, the Internet has provided a leveling platform for individuals to communicate and organize. On the web, people are free to speak, to “blog” and “vlog.” It is changing how we get our information and our news and it creates a space where anyone with access to a computer has a chance to be heard.

Given the democratizing aspect of the Internet, it is fitting that that is where *Thousand Kites* has found its home. Enlisting the services Free Range Graphics, (“offering top-quality design, communication and strategy services to companies and organizations whose vision goes beyond turning the world into a strip mall”^{viii}) to synthesize the

various components of the *Thousand Kites* project into a single website. In development is a viral media campaign to promote the work to a broader audience.

“This is the certainly the largest leap for an Appalshop project, relying heavy on new Internet strategies,” Szuberla explains. “We’re using webcasts, viral media, online archives, and net-roots activism to provide a sort of digital story feedback loop. Anyone can download a 30-minute cut of the film and organize a community screening – or download the play for a community reading.”

“For a staff the size of ours and with our capacity,” says Szuberla, “we can have a much larger impact with the web component. Plus the web saves us a lot of money. We mail one item per year because we think it’s important to send something out that you can physically hold, but the rest of the communication happens on line with email blasts.”

“Thousand Kites is partnering with a national network of prison reform groups including the National CURE, November Coalition, and the American Friends Service Committee. In several months, in partnership with communication experts, we will convene the leaders of such organizations to develop a detailed three-year communication advocacy strategy,” Szuberla adds.

Given its flexibility, ease and affordability, Internet technology is providing a means and a method for communication and distribution of *Thousand Kites*. The potential to reach a critical mass is suddenly within reach, building a movement that can indeed reform the U.S. prison system.

I ask Arlene Goldbard what she sees as biggest challenge facing *Thousand Kites*. She recounts her experience interviewing members of CURE, a local chapter of a national prison lobbying and reform organization:

The people I interviewed told me they couldn’t have heard this message and understood it fully before they went through it themselves. So I asked them, what do you do to get others to hear you? They said, ‘you just keep trying.’ Maybe one thing or another will touch them: they’ll like the play or respond to the movie and decide to get involved.

Not everyone needs to make a big commitment, and it doesn’t take a majority to reach the ‘tipping point’ where things start to change. The first challenge is for people to hear the truth of the prison situation, for example, that only 5-8% of prisoners are the violent offenders and many of the rest are people like your kids, who got caught with drugs. Many people will do something small, like click on an email to visit a web site or send a letter. Their efforts support those who are doing the heavy work. The little tipping points are important; if we can get enough people saying “that’s wrong,” then we can create change.

Arc of the project

I went to Appalshop with the intention of documenting *Thousand Kites* as a program that addressed the changing demographics of the Appalachian region. It wasn't until I was there, meeting with the program team that I discovered that the project also speaks to the changing demographics within Appalshop.

"The founders of Appalshop were of the 60's generation," says Goldbard. "They started out as idealists and were willing to sacrifice a lot to do the work. For a while, it appeared that younger generations didn't see their way of working as a model they wanted to emulate. Now the wheel is turning again. Dissent is high, and many young people want to change the world. It's heartening to see all the young people at Appalshop today.

Amelia Kirby and Nick Szuberla are representative of the next wave of artist-activists working at Appalshop. They are mid-career artists, bringing to the institution a new energy and a willingness to use new tools and approaches to fulfill the mission.

Kirby grew up at Appalshop. Her parents belonged to the founding generation of Appalshop. She worked and volunteered here, working on the radio and learning to edit films, until she left to attend college. After graduation, she came back because, "I wanted to make a difference in my community. I didn't think I'd be back so soon, but I saw that there was this need that had to be addressed, that lined up with my own interests, and so I came back."

Szuberla came to Appalshop from Toledo, OH, drawn to Appalshop's multi-media, grassroots, collaborative artmaking. He states, "Within Appalshop, we (H2H) are generationally different—we're not just 16-mm filmmakers. We're the second and third generation and we welcome more multi-media. We want to work on this issue and we will use all the technology available to do it."

"When we started, some of the older-school folks around here thought we couldn't pull it off because it was so wide spread (too many mediums, traditional and hip-hop, etc). They thought we'd burn out. Then it started to work. There is no project at Appalshop that we haven't worked with. Roadside was the last one."

"Before *Thousand Kites*, each project tended to stay to themselves mostly because they each have their own activities and artistic goals and funding. With *Thousand Kites*, we're crossing lines in new ways and it will have a long-term impact on the organization. It can change the way Appalshop projects work and develop. We have the opportunity to document and reflect back to the organization."

Cocke adds, "Typically, a not-for-profit arts organization facing the need to recharge its mission in the face of changing realities will go into a strategic planning mode, thinking through its situation from an elevated perspective. We decided to not plan and then implement the grand plan, but *plan, do, reflect, do* in rapid, iterative cycles, spreading what we were learning through the organization, building change as we went."

He continues, “If Appalshop stays working under old designs and categories, it will fall off the edge. For our purpose of changing the U.S. criminal justice system, the old disciplined-based categories alone in silos aren’t viable. We’re searching for a new way of working and in the process hope to help re-vitalize the Appalshop mission.”

Creating space

In their interim report, Appalshop wrote:

“As it enters its fourth decade, Appalshop faces a threefold challenge common to many progressive organizations founded in the 1960’s and ‘70s: recharging its mission in the face of growing inequalities; sustaining its local and national impact with diminished public and private resources; and using its accumulated knowledge to develop the next generation of cultural activists. Appalshop’s strategy is to address these challenges with an innovative program initiative that draws upon the organization’s multi-disciplinary capacity and extensive national network of artists. The program initiative will develop and test a new production and cultural organizing paradigm and in the process infuse new energy and learning into the organization. If proven successful, the paradigm may modify all aspects of Appalshop: its organizational structure, leadership, funding, and range of regional, national and international partners, as well as furnish examples of high artistic quality and effective cultural organizing practice from which the field can learn.”

The program initiative is *Thousand Kites*.

Nick Szuberla adds, “Pre-Artography we couldn’t figure out how to forge relationships within Appalshop to do a project like this. With this opportunity, we had to go to the organization and explain how we were going to do it—which required cross-discipline support. As a result, we’re building a new engine at Appalshop.”

The impact of Artography on Appalshop is positive and undeniable.

Because of Artography, the company has created its first database-driven website which allows shared content and interactivity with community partners and audiences.

Appalshop has also sent out its first online newsletter and developed an online e-mail database and communication plan.

“Artography gives us a way to engage the future,” says Dudley Cocke. “Our ongoing discussions include globalization and the changing economy. It’s technology that is driving globalization. People might look at us and say, “why are they thinking about globalization in this isolated rural town of 1,500?” The point of globalization is that we’re not isolated. By digging deeper into our own circumstances here, we find how we connect to the rest of the world. We responded when they built two prisons in our backyard and came to understand how the prison system plays out all over this country and the world. That might sound like overstatement, but after he was fired as Connecticut Commissioner of Corrections, because of the death of a 20-year-old first time drug offender that he had sent to our Wallens Ridge supermax, John J. Armstrong

became the Assistant Director of Operations of American Prisons in Iraq.”

Perhaps the gift of the Artography program is the ability to look up and ahead. It seems that most often, organizations get trapped, burying their heads in getting the work done. As Amelia Kirby says, “Artography has raised our capacity and it’s let us pause to reflect on the work—so important to reflect.”

The goal of transforming the criminal justice system is not a small one. And yet when you talk all with individuals involved, you don’t doubt that they will do it. It goes beyond passion to include strategy and vision—looking ahead. As they have testified, that is what Artography has enhanced.

ⁱ <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/correct.htm>

ⁱⁱ Appalshop proposal to the Ford Foundation

ⁱⁱⁱ Appalshop proposal, Basic Information, p. 2

^{iv} *News Release, Mark A. Miner, April 9, 1999;*

<http://george.loper.org/trends/2001/May/85.html>

^v <http://www.prisonactivist.org/pipermail/prisonact-list/2000-June/002894.html>, reprint of article “Virginia’s Wallens Ridge Prison Complaints Include Racism, Stun Guns “ By Edward Fitzpatrick, originally published in The Hartford Courant.

^{vi} www.appalshop.org/h2h

^{vii} (www.roadside.org).

^{viii} www.freerangegraphics.com

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