

Chapter 4. Cultural Organizing: Multiple Modes of Communication

We believe that positive change in the criminal justice system will occur when people from all walks of life can connect to the prison story; therefore, communication is both the means and the end of the project.

(Dudley Cocke)

We accomplished a lot with radio and film, but we still needed a communication tool with a low cost threshold, great accessibility, and the capacity for participation at the level of the artmaking itself. So we went to Roadside Theater.

(Nick Szuberla)

If the[ir] opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error.

(John Stuart Mill)

I direct attention here to various forms of artistic communication that provide a cultural dimension to community organizing in order to expand and humanize a social movement. My case study is *Thousand Kites*, which inserts radio, video, theatre, and internet resources into a campaign whose long term goal is to end the damage the US prison industry causes. *Thousand Kites* is grounded in the voices of prisoners, guards, and their respective families who experience the system's dysfunction daily.¹

A kite is prison slang for a message sent out from behind the wall. Advocates of prison change also send out messages, which they hope will affect public consciousness.

Thousand Kites casts a wide net as concerns the forms such messages take, audiences to whom they are addressed, and ensuing actions. It offers its multiple communication strategies to prison reform organizers committed to a public conversation. Its goal is to reduce the unprecedented rates of incarceration in the US, reform drug policy, and frame prison as a human and civil rights issue. According to a 2008 Pew Charitable Trusts report, more than one adult American out of every 100 is now behind bars. For black males between 20 and 34 years of age, the figure is one out of every nine (Warren et al, 2008: 3). The US has 5% of the world's population but 25% of its prisoners. In 2007 the US spent \$49 billion to lock people up. (For regularly updated US prison statistics, see the Human Rights Watch website, www.hrw.org.)

My interest in *Kites* is at once professional and personal. Professionally, I'm impressed by this project's effective integration of art in political organizing. *Kites* uses the whole gamut of expressive forms, each with access to people in different situations and a focus on different communicative purposes. Radio in this project gathers a public unable to connect face-to-face. Video condenses information and disseminates it far and wide in an emotionally-gripping way. Participatory theatre accommodates personal exchange through story telling and the live experience of putting oneself in the shoes of characters with various points of view. Websites collect ever expandable and accessible tools and techniques. The *Kites* team uses these tools to create access and foster connection among stakeholders who could be just about anyone: most of us are only a degree or two away from someone entrenched in the criminal justice system.

Personally, I am one degree from the criminal justice system. At the age of 21, I co-facilitated a theatre workshop in a men's maximum security prison. The experience

shook me to the core. Until then I thought of prisoners as “bad” if I thought of them at all. But almost all the men I met inside who had committed violent crimes were themselves victims of terrible violence, often at the hands of a family member. While this does not condone striking out at others, it suggests that if violence begets violence, humane treatment of inmates might lead to those incarcerated treating others humanely. How long such behavior modification takes with adults is a tough question. And it’s important to remember that the great majority of inmates have not committed violent crimes.

CREATING CULTURAL ORGANIZING TOOLS

Thousand Kites is a collaboration of diverse artists from Appalshop, a 40-year-old arts, activism, and education center in what used to be described as the coal fields of eastern Kentucky, in the Appalachian Mountains town of Whitesburg. Appalshop began as an Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) site, teaching film making. It quickly shifted from film to video in the early 1970s and expanded into music, theatre, and radio, all from the impulse to tell the Appalachian story from inside out, under one roof. It didn’t lead to jobs in the established film industry as the OEO had intended but rather created jobs right there. So that it did accomplish the goal of creating jobs and stimulating the economy but not according to the method the people from Washington had in mind.

Appalshop staff embrace an open door policy to people who want to work with them to solve community problems; the center as a whole embraces a practice of social call, aesthetic response. An example was the man who brought in a vial of water that was nearly pure black sludge. “This is our water because of the coal industry,” he said,

helping initiate Appalshop's campaign to hold coal companies accountable for the ramifications of their industry on local people and the environment.

Amelia Kirby, an Appalshop filmmaker and Appalachian native, explains that until 20 years ago when mechanization began replacing jobs, the coal industry controlled the economic life of the region. In the late 1990s, the closing of local mines accompanied the opening of two "super max" prisons - maximum security institutions built to accommodate inmates referred to as "the worst of the worst" from overcrowded institutions all over the US. Kirby recalls that 750 people in Wise County lost their mining jobs the same day the two new super maxes posted 800 corrections jobs. Kirby had just got back from college, and people she knew were suddenly working in prisons. She found it difficult to protest in the face of the region's lack of other employment opportunities (Kirby 2007). As writer Arlene Goldbard describes, these workers went from mining that abused *their* bodies to prison jobs which placed them in a position to abuse the bodies of others. (See her essays on *Kites* at www.communityarts.net.)

Now prisons are a major industry in Appalachia, and the voice of need around that industry is entering Appalshop in a different way than the sludge that community member brought in: through hundreds of letters from people incarcerated in the region. The messages initially found their way to Appalshop because of a hip hop radio show broadcast by Appalshop's radio station WMMT FM (self-described as "mountain community radio"), created and deejayed by Kirby and fellow Appalshop filmmaker and staffer Nick Szuberla. Called "Holler to the Hood" (H2H), the program, featuring hip hop music in its many variations, is the duo's voluntary contribution to Appalshop's radio station. Given radio's unique ability to permeate physical barriers and hip hop's city

roots, H2H quickly developed a large audience of urban men incarcerated in the burgeoning maximum security prison industry in the region. Soon the show became a two-way communication device. Although it was culturally familiar music that brought Appalshop to the inmates' attention, hundreds of listeners have since written letters to Kirby and Szuberla denouncing prison conditions.²

Moved by the letters, Kirby and Szuberla developed another communicative dimension to their program: connecting inmates and their families, who often live at too great a distance to visit, through on-air song dedications. Inmates in the two large maximum security prisons in the county, Wallens Ridge and Red Onion, are locked down 23 hours a day. This weekly program provides the possibility of hearing family or friends call in, dedicate a song or a reading to them, or just send a greeting. Lilly Branch Kennedy - aka Miss K, who organizes families of inmates in the Richmond, Virginia area - described her son in Wallens Ridge meticulously adjusting the antenna this way and that, holding it carefully in place, and waiting for Miss K to get through, just to hear her voice. Pulled in to the personal struggles of families of incarcerated people, Kirby and Szuberla instituted another program, *Calls from Home*, a live Christmas show broadcasting families dedicating songs and sending holiday greetings to their incarcerated loved ones over a free 800 number.

The precipitant that moved Szuberla and Kirby from videographers and radio volunteers, albeit socially-conscious ones, to cultural activists occurred one day in 1999. Szuberla was at Appalshop when a press release came in over the wire, announcing the opening that day of nearby "super-max" Wallens Ridge Prison. He grabbed a camera and was off, unhampered as he filmed nearly everything because he blended in with the

media assembled for the opening. A prison tee-shirt for opening day read “the ultimate bed and breakfast.” People laughed. Officials proudly showed off what amounts to a warehouse for what is not, as advertised, the “worst of the worst,” given that the number of inmates with serious crimes that officials were able to ship from across the country was insufficient to fill the 2,400 new beds. Rather people with prison sentences from states with over-crowded facilities who need to be incarcerated *somewhere* have been stuck there as well, not necessarily because of the severity of their crime.

Szuberla and Kirby went on to make a film, *Up the Ridge: A US Prison Story*, about the burgeoning national prison industry, grounded in abuses at their local maximum facilities. One of the most sobering sections of the film depicts two of the tragic consequences resulting from arbitrary use of these facilities. David Tracy was sentenced to Wallens Ridge despite committing only a minor drug infraction and being just a day over 20, the age minimum for that facility. He had a history of mental problems, exacerbated by being far away from his psychiatrist and family. Tracy couldn't take the brutality of the super max and killed himself. Another man, shipped there from Connecticut, went into diabetic shock, was put into five point restraint, and left alone. When guards returned to his cell they found him dead. He had serious burns from a stun gun. The governor of Connecticut denied the potency of the gun, saying it was like a bee sting. Nevertheless, in 2004, Connecticut, under pressure, removed its prisoners from Wallens Ridge and the entire state of Virginia.

Up the Ridge shows these stories and contends that such injustices are not limited to Wallens Ridge but characterize much of the United States prison industry, which incarcerates hundreds of thousands of inner-city minority offenders in regions distant

from friends and family. We learn that more than half of crimes are victimless (other than the incarcerated and their families) - drugs, mostly. In prison pay can be as low as five cents an hour. Viewers also see the toll on guards, many who worked in the mines before they closed, now spending at least eight hours a day, one third of their lives, in prisons.

Szuberla and Kirby not only made the film but also sought ways to insert it into the anti-super max movement, which has been gaining popular support for a variety of reasons. One is the financial burden of prisons on taxpayers. When *Up the Ridge* was released, George Allen was a candidate for the Virginia senate. People learned he'd spent billions of dollars on new prison facilities. Miss K thinks Allen's identification with building those prisons hurt him, even if, as she suspects, more people objected to the financial cost than the inhumane conditions. But whatever the reason, Allen lost the election by 7,000 votes. Organizers have shown *Up the Ridge* to legislators across the US so they know what they are signing on to by allowing the transport of inmates to other state facilities, and have no illusion that rehabilitation is part of the super-max agenda.

Up the Ridge, and *Kites* generally, evidence an atypical balance of personal expression and political usefulness for artistic projects. While most artists strive to create work that is utterly unique, Szuberla and Kirby want their work to be replicable, adaptable, and cut-up-and-put-back-togetherable. For example, Szuberla and Kirby passed their H2H radio methods on to communities all over the US, many of which now offer similar holiday call-ins at Christmas. It's an easy strategy to replicate, since one needs only to inform families to call in and prisoners to listen. According to Keith DeBlasio, a prison activist in Virginia, attaching prison advocacy to a religious holiday

makes it more complicated for people to get angry at what some perceive as coddling offenders.

For some families, especially those with loved ones in distant states, such radio shows are the first opportunity to reconnect since incarceration began. In the intense isolation many experience in prison, radio is one of the few links to the world beyond. It's nevertheless often hard for prisoners call in. They can only call collect. They are frequently discouraged from calling in themselves; one man who rapped over the radio was placed in solitary confinement for six months as punishment. The shows are also moving for people without direct connections inside, making the case for inmates' basic rights. They put a human face on incarcerated people, and remind listeners that most have families on the outside who are suffering, too, because of the incarceration. Dudley Cocke, artistic director of Roadside Theater also at Appalshop and part of the *Kites* team, notes that young people, too, get involved in the direct stories they hear in these exchanges, which are more real than the now omnipresent reality TV shows.

Nora Calahan of the November Coalition, an organization seeking to make the prison system more humane, has further mobilized the *Thousand Kites* project. Recognizing that the radio show helps inmates and families get through the holidays (which she refers to as hellidays), she emailed community radio stations all across Michigan to air *Calls from Home*. They got so many downloads - 3,000 - that their website crashed, but Calahan got *Calls from Home* on practically every public radio station in Michigan. To extend the radio shows' usefulness, Kirby and Szuberla made tapes of the calls for house party fund raising for grassroots groups.

Calahan urged Kirby and Szuberla to do more to raise consciousness about the prison system. So they reached out to Appalshop's Roadside Theater to add a face-to-face theatre piece to *Kites*' repertory. It's fairly typical for collaborations to develop between different Appalshop programs, where like-minded colleagues are working side by side. And so it was that H2H and Roadside joined together to make *Thousand Kites*, the play, based on story sharing with people involved in any way in the criminal justice system. The story gathering facilitates exchange of experience and provides the basis for a very simple and portable theatre production which itself leads to audience discussion. It thus adds theatre's ability to facilitate physical interaction at low cost and high accessibility to the *Kites* repertoire of cultural forms.

Donna Porterfield of Roadside wrote the *Thousand Kites* play using the method the company has developed over its thirty year history. The playwright conducts research which, depending on the project, includes such sources as interviews, story circles, historical documents, and personal letters. In the case of *Thousand Kites*, Porterfield facilitated story circles with an organization called Virginia Cure composed of families of prisoners and ex-parolees, ex-correction officers, career path correction officers and their families, and anyone else living in communities that house prisons. Story circles typically involve from five to twenty-five people who choose a theme and then, one by one, tell a related tale. Participants focus on listening to the other stories and only decide what to tell in response to what they have heard. Telling personal stories in this sense is a way to have a conversation, an exchange, a relationship to others. (See story circle details in the workbook section of the previous chapter.)

Gathering material for such projects requires casting a wide net. Families of correction officers were often scared that if they talked with Porterfield, their family members would lose their jobs. Lacking direct access to prisoners, Porterfield used Holler to the Hood's huge archive of materials which prisoners sent to them. Communities may adapt the play by inserting their own stories. Throughout the script creation process, the director typically functions as dramaturge or editor. The actors further shape the work through rehearsals. After public readings, the people who told the stories are invited to participate in story circles, which furnish still more material for ever-evolving scripts. Cocke explains, "By the time we produce the play, we've built a circle of stakeholders who recognize the roots of the play in their own lives and culture" (e-mail 12 September 2007).

The play features a prisoner, a guard, and five community members. It takes place over one day, with the monotony and rigid structure of the 24 hours clearly marked. Within that structure, we hear a range of views about experiences emanating from incarceration. Structurally, the written text is the first act of the play. The second act is the audience's spontaneous response and testimony, that is, an on-the-spot dialogue; and the third act is a call to action in which the people assembled come up with action steps.

The readings serve a range of purposes. Easily adapted to whoever plays the parts, it gets a range of perspectives in the room and seamlessly leads to public dialogue. It can be inserted into many contexts, such as at conferences to bring families, communities, and activists together, and come out with action plans. A play is more engaging than the "talking heads" model of conferences. The play can be cast on the spot, or can be preceded by modest rehearsal time, as much for more deeply connecting the actors to

each other and the issues as to more fully preparing the reading for an audience. There's also been one full production of the play, to date, at University of North Carolina/Asheville, with costumes, set, lighting, and memorized text rather than staged reading.

Cocke asserts that effective grassroots organizing around issues of social justice invariably begins small. He sees the basic unit of such organizing as the individual discovering through experience, reflection, and study his or her own truth about the issue, then testing and developing that truth in dialogue with others who also have knowledge. Others see the beginning of organizing as the act of looking out at the world. Aggregate and organize this knowledge about an issue and a movement for change can develop. Cocke believes that organizing can lead to change when those who directly experience a problem make up the generative base for devising and enacting the solution.

After the play was up and running, *Thousand Kites* hired Free Range Graphics to develop communication strategies for online outreach. They include a web-based tool kit, outreach guide, the film, 24/7 radio access, the play, and information about *Thousand Kites* events. People may call an 800 number with a digital answering machine and their information will be added to the *Kites* website. The call-in feature provides access to people who don't necessarily have strong writing skills or internet access. The *Kites* team has been data-basing as many categories as there are stakeholders, such as criminal justice writers, publishers, and issue-oriented radio personnel, allowing them to shape messages to very specific audiences. They have been learning about embedding their material in youtube, facebook, and myspace. This includes viral strategies, e.g., methods of easily spreading the message beyond merely posting it on a website, relying on each person who hears about it passing it on like a contagious disease. Poets who work in

prisons, for example, will get a letter targeted to them by a writer they might know, and that they can then email to their list of contacts. A different message would be sent by, say, a community radio person, addressing others with a general interest in high access radio, and spreading the message among them. This leaves the challenge of stitching these various constituencies together into a social movement, which organizations such as *Kites'* new partner (as of this writing in 2009), the Citizen Engagement Lab,³ is taking on.

The internet component aspires to make *Thousand Kites* interactive and to provide a sense of (albeit virtual) connectedness. One tactic is to insert numerous bubbles on a map. Click on one and get a story about a prison issue in that geographic location. Such a technique is also being used to get audiences to *Kites* events. Because of the isolation experienced by many people who have someone behind bars, the internet provides a sense of connectedness even globally around these issues. It also raises the question as to whether the internet can provide a sense of community or only a website. Perhaps it will have the capacity to show who else is on the site at any given moment.

In sum, *Kites* offers prison activists a menu of artistic dishes for a range of tastes and occasions. Radio has the capacity to overcome distance and scale the prison walls. Radio programs, such as Appalshop's *Holler to the Hood*, can take on any particular focus stakeholders desire; the *Kites* team will work with organizers on special programs. The video *Up the Ridge* is available in 56, 45, 36, 15 minute, and 30 second versions. On DVD, it can easily be screened at house parties, sent to legislators, and shared with audiences such as college students in a classroom. The theatre piece *Thousand Kites* provides a community-building, face-to-face process of story gathering. The script, adaptable to different situations, can be downloaded for free off the web and rewritten

with or without Roadside's help. Internet components include a dedicated website with access to the above tools which can also be imbedded on any other organization's website. Using viral marketing, the internet provides a low cost communication network that spreads the message.

Note that usefulness to the cause is valued more here than keeping a piece of art intact. Some artists who work in both the mainstream art world and community contexts have identified criteria that fit both, creating work that is at once useful and aesthetically satisfying. One criterion is the element of surprise, even astonishment, that choreographer Liz Lerman holds dear. An example from her work is seeing a 75 year old woman leap into the arms of a 20 year old man. The *Kites* team, too, surprises. Hearing and watching the mix of humanity at the play readings make their way through the text has been for me a moving experience of witnessing someone discover the pleasure of saying what they believe publicly or conversely, of having to speak a contradictory opinion and hence consider it.

THEORIZING CULTURE AS POLITICAL STRATEGY

A classic question that arises in artistic projects allied to politics is: Is it art or activism? It's time to get over the bias that art must be one or another. We have interdisciplinary specialists in everything from bio-ethics to social psychology. *Thousand Kites* is at once art and organizing. Much organizing in the 1970s and 1980s involved centralization - people already part of institutions like unions or living in the neighborhood with the problem. Activist Rinku Sen describes more recent organizing around "communities of interest," which "requires addressing issues that are ... rooted in the identities and subsequent attacks faced by the marginal - immigrants, youth, women of color, and the

very poor” (L). To that list one could add those affected by the criminal justice system. Because communities of interest may be more dispersed than those sharing an institutional or geographical home, organizing methods must be able to gather people. Viewing or performing art work become such occasions.

Political scientist Diana C. Mutz theorizes a role for cultural projects like *Kites* in political activism, or in her terms, how “communicative interaction benefits democracy” (5). First she notes the benefits of exposure to oppositional viewpoints through deliberative, reasoned discourse. According to Jurgens Habermas, known for his seminal writings on the public sphere, contact with diverse views encourages greater reflection. Such exposure transcends the parochial nature of personal experience (Calhoun, 1988). As noted in the chapter epigram, John Stuart Mill pithily describes the absence of such deliberation thusly: “If the[ir] opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth; if wrong, they lose what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth produced by its collision with error” (1956, p.21 [1859]). A film or play that communicates different perspectives in compelling ways is politically useful not by championing a particular position, but when it catalyzes conversations that bring these points of view into dialogue with those of the participants. We see this with *Thousand Kites*.

Mutz examines under what conditions such exchanges take place. She defines a *network* as those with whom one has face-to-face communication, and *context* as the environment in which that takes place. Mutz finds that the contexts in which most people move not infrequently contain diversity, but their networks rarely do: she contends that likeminded people mostly talk to each other. Thus diversity for Mutz refers to “the extent

that a given person is exposed to those of oppositional views versus those of like mind” (13). Even less frequently do people from different social networks share ideas in depth. By setting up exchanges that engage the diverse group of people touched in any way by the prison industry, *Thousand Kites* overcomes such ubiquitous segregation.

For example, the first public performance of the play *Thousand Kites* at which several of the communication strategies were employed together was in Jackson, Mississippi. Carlton and Maurice Turner, activist artists (and brothers) who organized the event, approached not only prison activists in the area but also several departments at Jackson State, a historically black college. They started with the English Department, approaching a literary society which was interested in the script. The literary society students took on the staged reading, rehearsing in the afternoon and then performing that evening, scripts in hand. The Turners also reached out to the Law and Political Science departments, who saw the project’s relevance to their studies about the criminal justice system.

The Turner brothers didn’t know if their efforts with other departments bore fruit until literally moments before the event began, when teachers arrived with their classes, bringing the audience to about 250 people. In addition to the reading, Szuberla and Kirby screened a 25 minute version of *Up the Ridge*. And then the audience spoke up, clearly grateful to be in a space where they could look for ways to improve the criminal justice system with people coming at the problem from different positions. For example, Ellen Reddy, who works with “juvenile offenders,” provided insight about systematic abuses she encounters. *Kites* organizers believe the event helped people see that even if they do not have a loved one behind the wall, they have stakes in a more just system.

Mutz's findings about networks and context differ from sociologist Robert Putnam's on related themes. Putnam uses the term "bridging" social capital for the creation of ties among heterogeneous groups and endorses membership in voluntary organizations that do not require shared ideology or identity, like sports and the arts, as places in which bridging occurs. "Bonding" social capital arises from occasions for homogeneous groups to build something of collective value together. Mutz finds that "tight-knit networks of reciprocal obligation are unlikely to go hand-in-hand with high levels of cross-cutting political conversation." The sites Putnam identifies as conducive to bridging social capital are not places characterized by in-depth political discussion. Voluntary organizations tend to be homogeneous, promoting relationships among similar people. That's where the arts' capacity to gather diverse publics can make a significant contribution to activism and democratic deliberation generally.

But is there, asks Mutz, convincing evidence that hearing other opinions tangibly improves individuals or society? Variables in the research make it hard to measure. In one study, materials presenting different views were sent out in advance of face-to-face deliberations. So was it the materials or the face-to-faceness that made an impact on people? Or the presence of experts when people actually met? Or is it that people of different views actually talked together? (59) Is more sustained contact among people with different points of view required for effective deliberative democracy? While these questions remain unanswered, Mutz found increased tolerance for difference through exposure to different views.

Mutz identifies a range of possible outcomes of linking deliberative democracy to social justice. On the beneficial end is "an awareness of oppositional perspectives, a

deeper understanding of reasons behind one's own views, and support for the civil liberties of groups whose politics one dislikes" (63). She cites a survey finding that people understood their own views better when they had to defend them in the face of opposing views. Their impact, when discussions reached sufficient levels of depth, was educational, providing new information. Mutz warns, however, that bringing people of different opinions together can have negative outcomes as well, such as bitter fights or more intransigent views:

So although exposure to differing points of view holds the *potential* for tremendous benefits, to realize these benefits, exposure must occur in a context where the collective project of getting along with one another in society is primary, and the elucidation of differences secondary.

(Mutz 62)

Mutz concludes that an extremely activist political culture is unlikely to be heavily deliberative:

Although diverse political networks foster a better understanding of multiple perspectives on issues and encourage political tolerance, they *discourage* political participation, partly among those who are adverse to conflict. Those with diverse networks refrain from participation in part because of the social awkwardness that accompanies publicly taking a stand that friends or associates may oppose.

(Mutz 3)

This speaks to the necessity to create contexts that balance the goals of deliberation and action.

That's where I take heart from Dudley Cocke's appreciation of conflict in democratic projects. The challenge to one's point of view and to the possibility that the status quo might change has got to threaten somebody or something substantial is happening. The better question is how we work through the conflict which is often a sign that the status quo is genuinely being questioned.

As if taking up where Mutz leaves off, social movement scholar Sidney Tarrow points out that "Although it is individuals who decide whether or not to take up collective action, it is in their face-to-face groups, their social networks, and the connective structures between them, that it is most often activated and sustained" (1998: 22). As applied to *Kites*, it's having something to do together, feeding the social network, via screening the film, making the play, and holding events, that people get activated because there's an event to gather them and provide a context for ongoing exchange. Indeed, Mutz cites studies that emphasize affect over cognition, e.g., the strength of *personal experience* in becoming tolerant of people different from oneself. The quality of personal relationships one develops improves with the number of deliberative discussions (68).

I'd go a step farther. Participating in a dialogue with people one seldom encounters otherwise is one thing; but making a play together, as in Roadside's work with people from diverse positions within the prison system, creates a deeper experience together. If the Jackson State students follow through with Ellen Reddy and do, say, a literature workshop at a juvenile facility, that more sustained contact could lead to greater

impact among people with different stakes and points of view. Such interpersonal contact is, according to Friedman and McAdam (1992), “the key source of new recruits into social movements, far more ... than ... ideology or individual predispositions as the motivation” (99). Art’s capacity to gather publics is thereby confirmed for its significant role in social justice movements.

Thousand Kites is a model of art providing both a context for democratic deliberations conducive to hearing various perspectives on an issue and to facilitating action. Whereas much art is considered complete once the artists finish making it, engaged art requires an ongoing sequence of call and response, and is not complete without waves of interaction with audiences. This interactivity is what positions *Kites* as a site for deliberative democracy. Cocke describes the *Kites* model as a feedback loop: based on the participation of the people most affected, artists create a formal articulation of criminal justice issues, an audience engages with it, responds, and that response feeds into the next iteration. The personal connection many of us have to people “inside” or to people who have people inside keeps the deliberations from stopping at the necessary but insufficient step of hearing other views.

Art balances intimacy and distance. When preparing for readings of the *Kites* play, both informal conversations at rehearsals and formal performed readings allow people to connect to the issues through the screen of the characters’ experiences. On the one hand, embodying ideas in characters and knowing their words come from interviews involves a degree of intimacy, bringing people close to the real experience and humanizing the situation. Since the reader is not the original speaker, audience members can reflect and freely respond, at a remove from the source of suffering and violence.

Another condition for deliberative democracy to be useful is that such conversations not be purely theoretical but tied to groups already engaged in action. For example, Miss K was already employing *Kites* tools, calling in to the radio and arranging video screenings. She then organized a second *Kites* reading in Richmond, Virginia, as a follow-up to the screening of *Up the Ridge*. There was no rehearsal; people volunteered to read the various roles on the spot, which worked just fine. Some months later Miss K sponsored an awareness day, featuring another reading of the play, this time in a local park. It attracted a larger audience and was the centerpiece for a range of activities including feeding the hungry people who congregate there. A third reading, in Lebanon, Virginia, organized by a prison support group, Virginia CURE, took on a particular poignancy when a man who'd been pardoned the day before came and joined the discussion. The reading was dedicated to him and celebrated his release. An officer from the sheriff's office also came, usefully expressing a different relationship to the system.

Part of the theatre piece's contribution to organizing is its flexibility, concerning where, by whom, and when to perform it.⁴ Roadside staff provide a theatrical structure which can be adapted as desired. More people's stories can be added; others can be removed. It is more personalized than a completely finished piece of dramatic literature, but more open-ended than Boal's tools, which tend to polarize people into oppressors or oppressed.

INTEGRATING ARTISTS AND ACTIVISTS

Eager to be as responsive to the criminal justice movement as possible, the *Thousand Kites* team of artists hired Working Films, an organization that strategizes ways to connect non-fiction films to activist contexts. For Szeberla and his colleagues recognized that organizing, like art, is a full time occupation. Before cofounding Working Films, Robert West was a media programmer, producing independent film series and festivals. The experience of screening *It's Elementary*, spotlighting a program in California elementary schools about kids encountering gay and lesbian material, led West to further the organizing potential of political films. In Charlotte, North Carolina, where the film was being shown, school personnel were required to refer young people raising questions about their sexuality to their religious leaders.

In the Q and A following the film, a young man in his 20s stood up and identified himself as a gay teacher who could be fired the next day for saying so. He condemned school policy around sexual questioning as counter to the reasons he became a teacher, which including wanting to protect them, and make schools safe. The silence around gay and lesbian sexuality, he proclaimed, was counter to making school safe. The room got quiet. This experience led the school board president, who had been invited and was, in fact, attended the screening, into a series of meetings that resulted in more openness about gay and lesbian sexuality in the schools. At enough of a remove to generate discussion but close enough to real issues to be relevant, the film became a catalyst and the screening a context, for the teacher to move a political issue forward and diverse players to be brought together.

Although ultimately a success story, the film's role in affecting school policy was, West recognized, too accidental. An infrastructure was needed, a way for filmmakers

with political goals to show their films to people thinking through action strategies addressing the same issues. That is, West believed that in addition to the festival circuit, filmmakers who hope their film will contribute to social change need to develop relationships with political activists on a separate and parallel track. Reaching organizers early enough for them to imbed a film in their work is an opportunity not to be missed.

Here's an example. In October 2001, Working Films cofounder Judith Helfant was completing a film called *Blue Vinyl*. She approached organizers of anti-toxin campaigns, for whom polyvinyl chloride (PVC), America's most popular plastic and the subject of her film, was the next target. Activists wanted consumers to take responsibility for the entire life cycle of this substance, known as a "bad" plastic, even though it is not harmful in the short term. How, she asked, can this film be of service? GreenPeace was getting ready to launch a campaign to get companies like Bath and Body Works and Victoria's Secret, who market themselves as vaguely green, to stop using plastics in their packaging. So Working Films prepared 1,500 postcards asking CEOs of such companies to stop using PVCs and launched the postcard campaign at Sundance where the film was being screened. Since bad plastics like PVCs only figured in 50% of their packaging it was possible to stop. Offices called back to set up meetings with Working Films, committed themselves to becoming PVC-free in their packaging by 2005, and did so.

Working Films does an internet search to find organizers whose focus fits a given film. West calls them and they generally love the idea of using media in their campaigns but don't know how. West explains the high profile release coming up that prompted his call, asks them to look at a DVD of it, and meets to suggest how they could include it in their organizing activities. West reports that a lot of non-profits and activists get called at

the last minute to *help a film*, rather than being asked how the film serves *their* interests. He believes that every documentary filmmaker needs community partners to vouch for their work; the authenticity of that relationship is crucial.

Appalshop envisions the role of culture in politics, as Szuberla explained to me, as helping facilitate a dialogue that isn't occurring, believing that solutions surface from the community: "The *Kites* staff members are not going to become criminal justice experts. Our area of expertise is not driving specific political goals and strategies but rather the skills to make art that generate dialogue and the trust that good things come out of dialogue." Szuberla states flatly that following up with grassroots activists is at the bottom of his "to do" list; he simply does not have the time.

This is where we see a conceptual shift from the model of one general campaign around an issue to numerous sharply focused campaigns. *Calls from Home*, for example, was one focused campaign. The Stop-Max (opposition to super max prisons) work was another. In both cases, *Thousand Kites* produced content (a web page, a post card) to support their projects. In fall 2008, the team began working with a group from the Virgin Islands whose men are being shipped to Virginia prisons, creating web pages, artistic productions, email blasts, and viral marketing to help them engage a broader audience and take action against this long distance incarceration.

In October 2007, Working Films helped organize a meeting in Philadelphia between the *Kites* artists and prison justice activists. The goal was to develop strategies to use the multi-media resources to: 1) leverage the project's strengths; 2) shed light on key issues; and 3) implement reform on criminal justice issues. West's pitch to the activists was that art is meant to be a window into *another world*, to connect to people, invite them

somewhere that perhaps they have never been, engage and empower them. In this case the *other world* is the criminal justice system. Working Films wanted to come out of the meeting with a sense of how to build an infrastructure so communities can use the art tools better to serve their cause.

The Philadelphia meeting generated numerous ideas about how to use *Kites* art for organizing. Most felt the need for a hook: prison artist Grady Hillman made the point, “The art work is great but it speaks to so many issues: family, human values, and how privatization and the profit base is destroying families and their connections to communities. For political organizing, we need to choose a focus.” Someone hoped the theme of incarcerated children would be developed. Other themes included what happens to people we love as they go from arrest possibly all the way to being tortured; and in light of a case in the news at that moment in Jena, Louisiana of institutional racism against several black teens, trying to map incidents of racial injustice. Several thought such a focus might segue into healing and restorative justice, e.g., directly responding to and improving the lot of the victims.

While all the artists were amenable, at issue was the capacity to develop the material. The theatrical component could accommodate such expansion of material most easily. Using the simple tool of the story circle, activists could be trained to gather stories specifically on that subject and insert them into the structure of the play. Dudley Cocke remarked that not only could the original material be reworked, but they had already responded to a request for a Spanish language version of the play and had made the translation. The activists shared examples of how the *Kites* tools had already proved expedient. A man from Richmond described a particular legislator who first said his

constituency wasn't interested in prison reform and later was turned around partly by seeing the film. West recognized the value of a full-time political strategist who could point to vulnerable districts and insert *Kites* in areas where the negative effects of the prison system were already felt. Someone else was interested in getting college students involved. Another activist emphasized marketing, not so much political strategy. He saw the value of producing images of youth who look like the kid next door, then seeing them change into a prison jumpsuit.

Not just *Kites*' content but the caring message its very existence sends people ensconced in the criminal justice system is part of its value. It counters how the prison system takes advantage of the shame stirred up around a family member going to prison. The radio show *Holler to the Hood (H2H)* lifts that shame by supporting a caring community of inmates and their families. Miss K asserted that *H2H* gave her a way to call out, without her face, and now she can speak on it because for her, now, it's not just her son, it's everyone's sons, of many different races and religions in prison. Another activist recognized the negative impact of shame silencing people and went public immediately when her son went to prison. It freed up a lot of people who'd been saying their children were away at college or the military. Because many people are talking about it now, she feels the prison reform movement can advance.

Arlene Goldbard applies Howard Gardner's theory of multiple ways of learning to different ways of persuading diverse audiences about the problems with the criminal justice system. Emphases include compassion, economics (your tax dollars wasted on these new prisons), the spiritual, human rights, civil rights, community development, and public safety. She proposes a button on the *Thousand Kites* website with these several

different arguments. Others felt they could not focus on different ways of communicating with different audience sectors until they decided on one thematic focus for a political campaign. Keith DeBlasio noted that his organization's work to pass the Prison Rape Elimination Act - the high incident of some prisoners raping others as the administration turns a blind eye - brought people from the conservative Jerry Falwell to the progressive ACLU together, because they all agreed that prison rape was wrong. The number of juveniles in the adult prison system made the issue all the more sympathetic. Having that common theme worked across many audiences. Yet others wanted to avoid specific goals, believing it's most important to get the material out there and discover in the process how it can be used.

The group identified multiple uses of the *Kites* materials geared to a range of audiences and various ways of getting it into their hands:

- * for policy makers and other community leaders, make *Thousand Kites* tool kits including cultural media to use in meetings;
- * for legislators whose constituency is represented in prison issues, provide places that are safe to come and respond. Perhaps insert a part for a legislator into the play;
- * for former prisoners, families, and support groups, forge connections as they re-enter society;
- * for STOP-MAX conference attendees, prepare specific materials and workshops;
- * for people who aren't active and involved, but affiliated with potentially sympathetic institutions like religious ones, announce *Kites* events in church bulletins. Find a member of the faith community to approach churches;

- * for young African American males, articulate the link between the education system and the prison system whereby African American males in particular are pipelined from one to the other;
- * for engaged artists and arts teachers, post material on the online Community Art Network;
- * for kids with incarcerated family members, create ways for them to network using the arts;
- * for high school students, integrate *Thousand Kites* material into the curriculum so as to present a more human and complex picture of incarceration.

Hearing the stories of celebrity ex-offenders is effective for some audiences. For example, the actor Charles Dutton was in prison, stabbed someone, and grabbed a book to bring to the hole. He accidentally took a collection of short plays. He came out 30 days later wanting to start a theatre company in that prison. When he got out, he went to community college and then to Yale.

The Philadelphia meeting ended with consideration of how to measure the success of *Thousand Kites* as an organizing tool. The level of opposition to *Thousand Kites* is likely to be an indicator that the strategy is, in fact, effective. Gathering statistics is also useful, such as noting the number of times the *Kites* DVD is shown, play adapted, and how many new radio programs there are whose origins can be traced to *Kites*. It's important to evaluate how any given activist organization grows through integrating these tools. One can track the amount of media attention these events garner the prison rights movement, as well as identify actual policy changes after contact with *Kites*. The project is valuable as training for people who've never organized through the media before.

Other indicators of success include celebrity buy in: the film star Morgan Freeman, for example, has a foundation for juvenile justice. Growth in funding for cultural organizing, slowing the expansion of super MAX prisons, and increasing reluctance to move prisoners across state lines are all signs of accomplishments.

Thousand Kites demonstrates the value of a community cultural center in political organizing. Appalshop facilitates multiple ways of telling a story, bringing artists from various media into collaboration because of their proximity, working together at Appalshop. At the same time, *Thousand Kites* teaches us the significance of story in political organizing. *Thousand Kites* asks: How do we uncover a story? How do individual stories of resistance hearten and those of injustice enrage, energizing us to avoid paralysis and take action? What are the appealing ways that stories create public awareness? Such art does not have to sacrifice aesthetics and complexity to accompany and support a social movement. Think about the beautiful aesthetics and power of songs in the civil rights movement, which both supported those already in the struggle and found their way to people as yet uncommitted. A movement, as activist singer and song writer Berenice Reagan told Cocke, is about gaining territory. And so it is with *Thousand Kites*: using the feelings, ideas, multiple perspectives, and stories of people in a range of situations to generate an ever-expanding discussion questioning incarceration.

WORKBOOK

The Creation of Scripts from Stories and Interviews

Ideally these exercises would be done not just with students but also with community participants. The more diversity and difference among participants, the richer the learning experience.

If You Have Not Yet Selected a Theme

Pick a theme likely to be of interest to the participants for the story circle. For example, invite personal stories related to the criminal justice system. (As with *Thousand Kites*, the premise is that the prison system is so pervasive that any of us is only a couple steps away from it.) Do story rounds. Then take those stories and, in groups, compose scenes. Use assets the participants have; for example, if you have a lot of dancers, let the enactment be movement driven. Set up some parameters, such as determining how many of the stories you heard you have the time to work with. Then lay out some compositional elements, such as allowing each dancer only four lines of text, staying close to the language of the original teller, and communicate the rest of story through movement. Or require at least one moment that they speak directly to the audience, and another moment that they speak as a chorus. After each group has composed a scene, show them to each other.

If You Have Already Chosen a Theme and Conducted at Least One Story Circle

Reconvene several people from the story circle with whom you would like to continue to work and ask: Who do we want a play based on these stories to reach, and with what effect? What's the story we're trying to tell, and whose story is it? Create a research plan identifying a combination of sources according to the subject matter which might include

such elements as interviews, story circles, historical documents, and personal letters. A next step would be to bring together actors and work as their editor, collaborating on decisions about the play. Set up early public readings that include the people from whom the stories came. Follow the readings with story circles to inform future iterations of the script.

Either Way

Bring together as many opposing points of view as possible. So the story here could be about a correction officer, a victim of crime, someone who is incarcerated, some impact on your community or a friend with a family member incarcerated. You want conflict. Donna Porterfield of Roadside Theater has found that people are more open to hearing different points of view that come from the experience and first person stories of those telling them. Such stories work better than argument in actually getting different people to hear each other. Therefore one of the principles in Roadside story circles is no cross talk. According to Cocke, “Theatre, in a way, is based on political incorrectness. Disagreement and difference are good things.”

Feel free to adapt and invent based on the situation you are in and the assets of the participants. The principle in using these techniques is to tap into each person’s creativity, including yours, sitting reading this text. Don’t use these techniques as cookie cutters.

Note that Roadside begins projects by articulating with its partners the values that will guide it. For an example of the form such partnership groundings take, see the Appendix.

Notes

¹ While this chapter is not an examination of the many ways the arts are used *within* prisons, with inmate participation, I refer you to work that does – Theatre in Prisons and Probations Centres (www.man.ac.uk/tipp); *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, by Michael Balfour, 2006; Buzz Alexander through the Prison Creative Arts Practice (www.lsa.umich.edu/english/pcap) Grady Hillman (for example, “Working through Walls” in *Movement Research Journal #15, Moving Communities*, fall/ winter 1997-8); Bill Cleveland, *Art in Other Places*, University of Massachusetts: Arts Extension Service Press, 2000; and Philip Taylor, *Theatre behind Bars: Can the Arts Rehabilitate?* Trentham Books, 2010.

² Information about the development of *Thousand Kites* comes from intermittent phone conversations with Kirby and Szuberla throughout 2007.

³ The Citizen Engagement Lab (CEL) uses new media and technology to inform and activate issue-based communities, with a focus on amplifying the voices of African Americans, Latinos, and young people. Their mission is “to create a network of overlapping constituencies that act as distribution channels for key progressive messages and calls-to-action. CEL serves as an infrastructure umbrella for our current projects (ColorOfChange, Video the Vote, and GNN.tv), an incubator for launching new initiatives, and a strategic new media and technology resource center to strengthen the progressive infrastructure.” Their process entails: 1. organizing communities online using digital media and targeted calls-to-action; 2. facilitating ongoing activity among

community members while identifying influencers who seek a deeper level of engagement; and 3. providing tools to those influencers to help them assume leadership and facilitate the engagement of others.

⁴ Cocke remarked that the Czechs found theater to be the most subversive art during communism because it is the hardest to control. Playwrights would describe new plays to the censors and make changes as required. But in performance, some of the offending language could find its way back in, although actors and playwright could deny ever veering from the approved script.