Art and democracy. Exploring new ways to work creatively with citizens[1]

Arte y democracia. Explorando nuevos caminos para trabajar creativamente con ciudadanos

Luis Ángel Puello Orozco ID
Charles F. Kettering Foundation, United States, luispuelloo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

For democracy to work as it should, three fundamental elements are needed: engaged citizens, communities that act together, and institutions with legitimacy that empower citizens. But when this does not happen, it is necessary to look for new ways to introduce citizens to the exercise of democratic practices. To that effect, this article seeks to explore the potential of art to motivate and empower citizens, as well as entire communities, through techniques ranging from Theatre of the Oppressed to Participatory Public Art.

Keywords: Public Art; Democratic Practices; Theater of the Oppressed; Public Deliberation; Cultural Practices.

RESUMEN

Para que la democracia funcione como debe funcionar se necesitan 3 elementos fundamentales: ciudadanos comprometidos, comunidades que actúen unidas e instituciones con legitimidad que potencien el trabajo de los ciudadanos. Pero cuando esto no se da, es necesario buscar nuevas formas de introducir a los ciudadanos en el ejercicio de las prácticas democráticas. Es en esa medida que este artículo busca explorar en el potencial que el arte tiene para motivar y empoderar ciudadanos, así como comunidades enteras, mediante técnicas que van desde el Teatro del Oprimido hasta el Arte Público Participativo.

Palabras clave: Arte Público; Prácticas Democráticas; Teatro del Oprimido; Deliberación Pública; Prácticas Culturales.

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INTRODUCTION: Why art

When my family and I started the nongovernmental organization (NGO) FIS Foundation (Fundación de Integración y Desarrollo Social de Cartagena) in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, we did so with the intention of democratizing access to music education for children from poor neighborhoods. We had discovered the potential of art to transform life, empower expression, and keep young people away from violence, and we wanted to bring this to many more citizens.

As time went by, we realized that something fascinating was happening. Not only were the kids getting more and more involved in their artistic processes, but their families were committing themselves to maximizing the results and looking for solutions to common problems, such as the lack of resources to get uniforms or the need to provide the kids with snacks to improve their concentration in class. All this occurred in the neighborhoods of "El Milagro," "La Central", and "Los Caracoles," where the levels of participation were very low and the needs of many just to obtain daily sustenance were high. The efforts it took just to survive meant that most families had not been involved in collective processes.

But as these families began to get involved, I began to understand that art is a powerful tool for making democracy work as it should. It allows people to express their dreams, their visions of an ideal community full of nobility, in which everyone ends up participating in the efforts and the benefits.

In this article, I explore the relationship between art and democracy, specifically as it relates to the ability of art to enhance the civic capacity of citizens.

1. The Relationship Between Art and Democracy

To understand the relationship between art and democracy, first we need to understand the meaning of democracy and what it takes to make it work as it should so that we can then analyze what role art might play.

1.1 Citizen-Centered Democracy and Its Problems
For the Kettering Foundation, democracy is a system in which the people collectively generate the power to shape their future (Mathews, 2015), and it works as it should when citizens, communities, and institutions are aligned (The Kettering Foundation, 2014). Each one plays its own part:

- Citizens must be civically engaged and make sound choices about their future.
- Communities of citizens must act together to address problems.

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- Institutions with public legitimacy must contribute to strengthening the work of citizens.

Kettering's understanding of citizens resonates with artist Augusto Boal's idea of citizenship, when he says that "a citizen is not who lives in a society, but who transforms it" (Boal, 2012).

Unfortunately, this vision of democracy faces systemic problems that interfere with it and make it unable to function as it should. According to David Mathews (2014) in his book The Ecology of Democracy, these problems are:

- Citizens aren't engaged; they are on the sidelines.
- Issues are approached and discussed in ways that promote divisiveness.
- People may get involved yet make very poor decisions about what they should do or which policies are in their best interest.
- Citizens think they can't really make a difference in politics because they don't have the necessary resources.
- Citizens may act, but their efforts go in so many different directions that they are ineffective.
- There is an absence of shared learning.
- Mutual distrust burdens the relationship between citizens and most major institutions, governmental as well as nongovernmental.

However, because democracy is governance based on the power of people to shape their future, these systemic problems can't be solved without citizens. They are the center of the solution. In this sense, it is necessary to increase the civic and creative capacity of our communities to solve problems, become more resilient when faced with challenges, and promote cooperation. To involve people in civic life, it is necessary to look for the most essential things that people hold dear, the things critically important to our collective well-being. These imperatives motivate us to become politically active.

What role could art play in overcoming these problems? It is generally accepted that art is a powerful tool for communicating and generating awareness about different problems because it influences the level of emotions and allows expression in ways that written or oral languages do not. But will this be its full potential? Or are there other ways in which art can help increase the civic capacity of citizens?

To begin to answer these new questions, let's look at the practices that citizens carry out in their communities to work together in shaping their future and, in this way, we can analyze the role that art plays in each of them.

1.2 Democratic Practices

When we talk about democratic practices, we are not referring to techniques or methodologies, but to ways of doing the work people must do to shape their future and play a stronger role in decision-making and addressing shared problems. Six practices that promote democratic values and stimulate the learning that allows citizens to combat many of their own problems are listed below:

- Naming problems to capture what is most valuable to citizens.
- Framing issues to identify all the options—and the tensions in them.
- Deliberating publicly to make sound decisions.
- Identifying and committing resources.
- Organizing complementary acting.
- Learning as a community.

As Mathews says, the practices aren't tools, nor are they separate activities. Rather, they are interrelated efforts in a different way of doing politics. They are ways of both learning and doing simultaneously. This means that there are many ways to implement these democratic practices and there's an open door to think of creative ways to get different results.

2. Naming and framing in creative ways

The first two democratic practices I want to explore are naming problems and framing issues. First, problems can be named in terms that resonate with the things people value. Second, problems represent an opportunity to create an inclusive framework for the decisions needed to make visions into realities and include numerous courses of action that reflect people's concerns (Mathews, 2014). *"The ability to name and/or rename a problem is one of the most effective accomplishments of an artwork, and artworks can help identify problems and suggest solutions on a very broad level"* (Lvova, 2017).

First of all, to name problems, it is necessary to gather public concerns capturing the language people actually use (Rourke, 2014), using questions such as these:

- How does a specific problem affect you and your family?
- When you think about this problem, what concerns you?
- What bothers you most, personally?
- What concerns do you hear from friends and family members-or others you don't know well-about this problem?

At this stage, there is not yet a name for the issue (in the sense discussed earlier), but the name of the issue emerges from these inquiries and the analyses that follow. The final step is to take this raw material into groups or clusters that have, at their core, the same underlying thing held valuable.

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¬This is when the name of the issue will begin to emerge and become validated, illuminating the core tension inherent in it.

To understand more deeply the benefit that art can have in these practices, we must understand that spoken or written language is not the only form of expression. Many languages are not linguistic, and "each language offers a new way of knowing reality and transmitting that knowledge to others" (Boal, 2015). Thus, we have the language of music, painting, cinema, theatre, photography, dance and as many others as we can imagine.

The signs and artistic products that emerge from these languages are powerful in themselves as they reflect the feelings of the people who capture them, but they can also be the starting point for arts-based civic dialogue, for deeper and more humane conversations about what is really important to the community, and for breaking through the polarization around some issues (Korza, Schaffer, & Assaf, 2005).

An example of this is narrated by Augusto Boal (2015), during the ALFIN plan, a literacy program developed in Perú, which had two core objectives: (1) literacy in the native language and in Spanish; and (2) literacy in all possible languages, especially artistic ones. For this, it was necessary to "put the means of production of these arts in the hands of the participants," in other words, to teach them to do theatre, to dance, to take photographs, and to paint. The main objective was to teach people that they could express themselves using these new languages. For example, in the case of photography, says the author, they asked simple questions in Spanish (such as Where do you live?) but they had to answer using photography. Each photo was then analyzed and discussed. In answer to this specific question, for example, one participant showed a photo of the interior of a hut built with mats instead of walls and ceilings. Another showed the river, which grows in the rainy season and brings down some huts. Another one showed the area where the pelicans feed on garbage, a place where they go to hunt to have something to eat. And, finally, another showed a picture of a child with a face full of blood because during the night the rats had gotten into the hut and had bitten him. By expressing in the language of photography the description of the place where they lived, they ended up talking about their concerns, which started new conversations.

As we can see, this is an example of how concerns about an issue can be gathered through art, which can be the first step, as described above, in naming a problem in terms of what is valuable to people. This kind of approach can be especially useful with groups that are commonly marginalized in decision-making processes, even within the same community.

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But just naming the problems is not enough to successfully develop a public and deliberative process; it is also necessary to frame issues by identifying all the major courses to collective action and create an inclusive framework that reflects the people's concerns and the tensions in them. It allows the conversation to open up and become less dogmatic (Mathews, 2014). In the experience of the Kettering Foundation, because it can be difficult to face such choices, supporting materials (issue guides) are developed. But this is not the only way. As Brad Rourke (2014) says, "Any approach that sincerely considers public concerns and exposes the trade-offs that we must face to move forward on difficult issues is likely to be effective."

According to this, some techniques of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed could be effective ways to frame issues and identify multiple courses of action. Specifically, Image Theatre and Forum Theater, which I describe below:

- Image Theatre: In this technique, participants are asked to express their opinion or the way they see a certain issue or problem as difficult to solve, using not words, but the bodies of the other participants to express the situation. This image is called the "real image". They are then invited to express through another image how they would like that situation to be. This is called the "ideal image". This is when the discussion of possibilities begins as participants are then invited to create another image to show the way or ways to reach that ideal image. This is called a "transit image". Each participant can express him- or herself through a different image, and use as many as necessary to understand the possible courses of action (Boal, 2015).

- Forum Theatre: This technique starts with the collective creation of a short theatre play in which, after being presented to the public, the spectators can participate by becoming actors and actresses in the play. The procedure is very simple. One of the group members who serves as animator of the room (the joker) says "stop," when someone among the spectators puts up his hand because he wants to express his point of view about the current scene. Then the scene stops and the spectator is invited to replace the actor on the stage. The spectator has to be the protagonist of the dramatic action and prepare to be the protagonist of his own life as well. The session ends by proposing the construction of a model for future action based on the proposals presented only by the spectators. The show begins in fiction, but its objective is to integrate into reality (Motos, 2009).

The author of these two techniques always places as their targets homogeneous groups of "oppressed," who share similar concerns and therefore have the potential to unite to face the oppression. However, he argues that:

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> No scene in the Forum Theatre should be exposed on a microscopic scale without the essential elements of the map of the situation (. . .). We must consider the totality of this universe . . . climb up to the macrocosm because it is almost always at the top of the pyramid that we find the origin of the problems, the necessary pressures to be exerted and the possible solutions (. . .). The joker must help the audience move from a circumstantial understanding of the problem to a structural vision, looking for more complete solutions (Boal, 2012).

This vision can limit the diversity of possible courses of action, however. In that sense, it is very important for the democratic process to include diverse groups in order to obtain a more inclusive and broad framework to be analyzed before deciding which actions to take collectively.

3. Building Democratic Muscles: Deliberating for Complementary Acting

Practices such as those described above leave everything ready to take the next steps in democratic processes, such as making sound decisions deliberatively, identifying and committing civic resources, and starting to act together in the same direction. Continuing with the exercise initiated in the previous section, we will analyze some forms of creative work through art to enhance or explore in these practices.

In addition to the Forum Theatre technique, which we saw culminating in the choice of an alternative among all the planned ones, there is another technique also proposed by Boal called Legislative Theater. Although, not universally applicable, it is a perfect example of the use of the arts in deliberative processes. This approach expressly seeks to use theatre in a political context, with the purpose of creating a stronger democracy (which is called by the author "transitional democracy"). Thus, theatre forums become the starting point for stimulating debate on issues that affect the community and for collecting ideas for legislation. These ideas are then concretized and formalized by a group of experts and returned to the community for validation before being submitted to the formal legislative process. In the state of Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), for example, 12 municipal laws, a decree law, a plenary resolution, 2 state laws, and 2 legislative projects have been elaborated under this modality (Motos, 2009).

> Many community-based activities often start with a simple desire to organize a local event. Most individuals and small groups do not even think about these organizing efforts in terms of community activism. Often, they simply desire to bring people together to do something interesting or enjoyable (Lvova, 2017).

Even in experiences that are not born out of formal processes of deliberation, art plays an invaluable role in the process of community building because, as mentioned above, it allows collective action and the identification of

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community resources, which end up empowering citizens. This is the case of Participatory Public Art, in which the public plays an active role rather than merely being appreciative viewers, and it allows for varied participation, including public engagement in planning, selection, creation, installation, maintenance, and collective appreciation of the murals, sculptures, or other art forms that are created in public spaces in the community (Brennan, 2019).

When these experiences are carried out collaboratively, they tend to create synergies with other organizations that enter into the process. In the case of an experience in the Alto Verde neighborhood of Santa Fe, Argentina, the collective artistic recovery of a pedestrian walkway ended up involving 50 artists, the neighbors, and the local parish and companies that donated materials and paintings. In this way, the process ended up being a community transformation that permeated the forms of relationship and participation, more than an artistic transformation. All this is reflected in the participation of this community in various subsequent processes to continue transforming their community (Fernandino & Molinas, 2010).

In every case, making something together can create a sense of ownership as well as a sense of collective identity. That could be the stimulus communities need to get off the sidelines and take a strong hand in shaping their future.

4. Learning and Creating as a Community

Public learning develops a citizenry's capacity for seeing new possibilities in life. Opportunities for public learning aren't confined to final evaluations; they can occur all along as citizens do their work. In many ways, public learning is renaming, reframing, and deciding again – after the fact. It is deliberation in reverse. Learning communities don't copy models or use formulas. They create better practices (Mathews, 2014). This is crucial for democracy, especially because in many places, violence has first ended with different forms of memory. In this sense, the mere act of learning and remembering becomes an act of resistance and revolution and can create a greater sense of community belonging. In this process, art can help us to write, through different languages, our memory, and that memory risks being transformed without forgetting its roots (Mejía, 2015).

This relationship between art and education for democracy has existed since the beginning of democracy in ancient Greece. For them, an important part of the formation of a citizenry that barely internalized democratic principles was epic poetry (which was studied by all citizens), festivities, and theater (especially tragedies and comedies). Although at that time in history the status of citizens was restricted, this was important because it allowed them to have an awareness of a common past and culture, which maintained solidarity among them. Also, through the catharsis that took place in the theatre, people could develop feelings in favor of democratic living and, moreover, they

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discovered that it was possible to transform the world in which they lived (García, s.f.).

On many occasions, art shows what needs to be left behind as a community and becomes, at the same time, an act of liberation. This is the case of The "Dream Weavers" of Mampuján, a group of women from Colombia who found in tapestry weaving a way to capture the horrors of war and their longing for a country at peace (Castrillón, 2015).

This tapestry represents the massacres and displacement suffered by the inhabitants of María La Baja, Colombia. Credits: El Espectador.

These learnings can contribute much to the processes of education for democracy through articulation with institutions seeking the appropriation of common values in the youngest members of the community. So, the art could be used to improve the dynamics of educational, social, and cultural integration through proposals related to the promotion of attitudes for tolerance, solidarity, and creative coexistence that foster a critical awareness of the mechanisms of social exclusion and eventually become a conscious process of individual and collective growth (Abad, 2010).

This is crucial because deliberating requires free, equal, and rational individuals, and this is possible only when in our growth we have learned to respect, to collaborate, to participate, to converse, and not to resolve our discrepancies in mutual negation. The emotion that is characteristic of democracy allows us to enjoy and imagine how possible and legitimate it is to live in mutual respect (Maturana, 1994). The most important thing is to generate spaces where people can express their feelings and concerns about their lives and their community and their fears, as well as their hopes and dreams. On this issue, no formulas work universally. Every community must learn from successful experiences and take the best from them.

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5. Some Advantages of Working through Art

When thinking about the relationship between art and democracy, one could fall into the utilitarian temptation of saying: Isn't this a lot of work? Don't traditional methods and experiences of democratic work function properly? In the face of this temptation, I'm going to present some of the benefits that make democratic work through the arts important, even necessary.

- Art can act as a counterbalance, allowing time to reflect on the issue and understanding it fully first, before moving to a solution (Korza, Schaffer, & Assaf, 2005).
- These forms of expression and communication already exist in the community and are most often welcomed by all citizen groups (Mejía, 2015). This is especially important in communities with very low levels of participation because of the community's own social dynamics, the corruption of their leaders in previous efforts and projects, or factors associated with violence.
- It overcomes the problem of illiteracy (in terms of spoken and written language), offering different possibilities of expression through the body, image, and sound, what Augusto Boal calls "sensitive thinking" (Boal, 2012).
- It gives a voice to groups that may traditionally be excluded from democratic processes, such as children, youth, and the elderly, by gathering their concerns about public issues.
- In the same way, art can open the door to integration of people with different disabilities, allowing greater plurality of views in the democratic process.

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