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Conscious Connections: Keynote address

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Conscious Connections

Keynote Address

Nancy Cantor
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Today as we explore the many ways to imagine, create, and sustain two-way connections between artists and their audiences and broader communities, including universities, it's important to underscore the transformative nature of these connections, especially when they are embraced deliberately, as this year's conference theme of *conscious connections* suggests.

We know this as individuals---as presenters, performers or members of the audience. The dancer Twyla Tharp once said, "Art is the only way to run away without leaving home." For a little while, the magic of art can carry us to a different place, and we find ourselves at home among strangers, laughing, crying, toe-tapping---puzzled, shocked, or amazed. We leave with the sense we have been changed.

Perhaps it's only a small way that doesn't even show up for a few days until we find ourselves thinking about it or wanting to hear or see something again. Perhaps it makes us look at something or someone else in a new way. Or we may experience one of those rare, shattering occasions in which we realize we've been oblivious or numb up to that moment---like falling in love or taking off a blindfold ---and we are aware of sounds, colors, truths, feelings, motions, dimensions, and possibilities that are utterly new.

The arts can, do, and should also make it possible for groups and for larger communities to change and be changed, to re-imagine themselves and see galaxies of new possibilities: worlds to discover, histories unveiled, new perspectives on relationships or politics, movements and music that are utterly new.

This is a two-way street. What comes back from these audiences and communities will profoundly affect---as it always has---everyone involved in the creation of art, because the arts are, by necessity, based on teamwork and broad collaborations. They are also always works in progress that change from day to day, from hour to hour, and from minute to minute in performance.

The symbiosis between the arts and education is so powerful because both are profoundly *social* in nature---created deliberately to affect others. They take place in real time, they seek our minds and our hearts, and they hope to go with us when we walk out the door. They thrive in community, and they have done so through all of history, because as children and throughout our lives we make our selves through our experience of others.

¹ This speech was prepared as a keynote address for the Arts Presenters' 52nd Annual Members Conference in New York on January 11, 2009. I wish to acknowledge the many contributions to the thinking in this piece from my colleagues, Jo Thomas, Jan Cohen-Cruz, and Carole Brzozowski.

The arts and education are both vital to creating and sustaining our communities, our culture, and our democracy. It's critical that we concern ourselves with nurturing and expanding the connections between and among them. In fact, it's urgent. We're not talking about frills here.

Nurturing the Social Context of Art, Education and Community

As we look around us, we talk and worry about the potential for isolation in a world where new technology makes it more and more possible to work all the time and in every place, a hyper-individualistic and competitive world that can leave us so stressed that all we want to do is go home and collapse. As a recent survey of performing arts presenters has shown, we are concerned about the opt-out culture in which we live.

The good news is that the same technology has also opened doors to an opt-in culture where we can become aware, at almost viral speed, of possibilities to connect personally with others in real time in real places, as so many people did on election night in huge and previously unannounced gatherings in city after city. The same technology can also make it possible for artists and audiences and communities to interact with each other in amazing, thrilling, thought-provoking ways.

We are social beings who, for good or for bad, inhabit the world together even though we have built many walls to isolate and keep away from each other. Along with education, art, as Angela Davis beautifully envisioned, can turn “walls into bridges.”² The arts are both individual and profoundly social. They constitute both our private experience and our public memory and collective conscience. At their best, art and education shake the imagination in the here and now and urge it to chart new futures, not for the individual alone but for groups, for communities, for societies.

From Creative Campus to Creative Community

In this morning's session on the Creative Campus, we heard about powerful examples of the ways in which conscious connections can be formed between the arts and other disciplines, all across our campuses, to spur creativity. In these experimental projects, funded by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, arts presenters function as catalysts to forge not just repertoires but relationships – that is, collaborations that attract new audiences and new participants, in and outside the official boundaries of the arts disciplines and for that matter of the campus.³ The expansiveness of these projects and their ambitions to reach across disciplines, generations, and audiences leads me to turn to ways in which the creative campus becomes the creative community. When arts presenters and arts organizations and artists join forces to build sustainable collaborations in communities and with community partners, the very nature of our neighborhoods, our schools, and our landscapes can be changed. Ellen McCulloch-Lovell,

² Angela Y. Davis, “Walls turned sideways are bridges,” *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (New York: International Publishers [reprint], 1988) 346.

³ Steven Tepper, Notes from Creative Campus Caucus Meeting, hosted by the Mellon Foundation, May 2008. See also Joe Nickell, “Change Agents on Campus,” *Inside Arts*, September/October, 2008, 38-43.

President of Marlboro College and a panelist today, has written compellingly on this point, in an essay for *The Chronicle Review*, entitled: *Colleges as Catalysts for the Creative Class*.⁴

In my comments, I will consider how we make these conscious connections and how they can be transformative. I embed my discussion in the importance of *place*, considering the ways in which the arts – and the conscious collaborations we build through the arts – can constitute a *third space*, where our scholarship, discovery and education flourish while communities change and people come together, sometimes in harmony and other times in necessary conflict, to effect that change.⁵

Syracuse: A Thought Experiment in Progress

Before taking note of the elements that may help build and sustain this third space of transformation, I want to briefly set a backdrop of one creative community that is a “thought experiment in progress,” namely, my own – Syracuse, NY. I do this because I think of our older industrial cities as one very timely stage for this kind of collaborative production. Syracuse still has major assets: some glorious downtown buildings from its heyday and a remarkable arts infrastructure. But for decades, it has been losing population, jobs, and housing. Like so many of our nation’s cities, it has neighborhoods that have been left behind to struggle with failing schools, decaying landscapes, and few jobs.

At the same time, Syracuse---like most cities---has great intangible strengths. We have a long tradition of activism in the cause of social justice. In the struggle against slavery, Syracuse was an important station on the Underground Railroad--- Harriet Tubman's home lies only a few miles from us. It was a cockpit in the struggle for women's rights and suffrage, epitomized by the hub of activity from nearby Seneca Falls. And it has been the home for centuries of the Onondaga Nation, the capital of the six-Nation Haudenosaunee Confederacy.

Like other major industrial cities, Syracuse experienced the explosive growth generated by the construction of the Erie Canal. In just 30 years it was transformed from a landscape described by an 1820 visitor as "so desolate it would make an owl weep to fly over it," to a bustling center of discovery, transportation, and connectivity.⁶

This heritage of social activism and innovation has provided the historical legacy for using the arts, technology, and design to revitalize Syracuse today.

In its days as a prosperous metropolitan center, Syracuse developed major cultural institutions that were situated downtown and have remained there: museums, galleries, the library, theater, symphony, and opera. Just a short distance away, up on a hill on the other side

⁴ Ellen McCulloch-Lovell, “Colleges as Catalysts for the Creative Class,” *The Chronicle Review*, Volume 53, Issue 16, p.B15.

⁵ It is important of course to note that this kind of third space of art-as-transformative social change is by no means the sole or even the main purpose of creative campus work or for that matter of the presenting arts more generally.

⁶ Quoted by Mark Kurlandsky in *Salt: A World History* (New York: Penguin, 2002) 248, and cited by Peter Bernstein in *Wedding of the Waters: The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2005)361.

of the interstate, are located a cluster of major hospitals and universities, including Syracuse University. At a walk, they're only 15 minutes from downtown, but they became different worlds as the city declined.

Now I want you to imagine a freezing, snowy night early last month when a small but hearty crowd of university staff and faculty members, students, neighbors, business people, and legislators, including our Congressman and the Mayor, put on their coats and hats and went outside to watch the entire side of a building---bigger than the largest screen in Times Square---light up with artwork and video that will be projected from nightfall until 11 p.m. every night of the year. Two other very large downtown video screens, one on the side of the Onondaga Historical Association and one on the side of Syracuse Stage, have joined it to create, we are told, the largest urban video project in the nation. It's a brilliant addition to our visual landscape.

This project, which intends to unite and ignite our social landscape, will invite people with ideas, energy, and talent---and some new technical skills--- to send content and have it shown much, much larger than life. Just as important, it's part of a larger agenda in which "anchor institutions" ---the "Eds and Meds"--- of Syracuse join forces with the artists, neighborhoods, businesses and local, state, and federal leaders to highlight a bright future.⁷

We're collaborating with teachers from kindergarten through high school to imagine assignments that can go public, not only in drawing and painting, but also in the performing arts, history, or science. We're also working with students in middle school and high school in film and animation. And we've invited local artists and arts organizations to workshops where they can discuss project ideas and simple technical specifications for using the venues.

These huge, blank walls in our city can be anything Syracuse people want them to be, including screens for public debate which, as the mayor said at the opening, "kind of worries me," so it's important to note that the submissions do have to meet the project's artistic standards and be approved by the city's new Public Art Commission.

As Denise Heckman, the design professor working with the project said at the project's frozen debut: It's kind of like throwing your television out on the snow, making it 100 times as big, and then letting people who don't have any expensive production facilities send you content." We are excited about this!

Geography of the Creative Campus/Community

Building a creative campus/community is a goal we share with colleges and universities across the nation, and it can have many expressions. The conscious connections we're discussing this morning are vital to this effort. For our particular vision, we began in Syracuse by thinking about *place*, about how the physical landscape of the City could become a stage for creative innovation that would draw upon our strengths – from urban design to Green Technology to entrepreneurship to inclusive education to ethnic studies to public communication to theater –

⁷ See, for example, <http://connectivecorridor.syr.edu/>; <http://www.saltdistrict.com/>.

and would also bring to life neighborhoods, history, public memory, inter-cultural dialogue, and more.

We have set our criteria for investment at a relatively high bar. Projects have to be large in scale and complex in partners. They need to engage our faculty and students in work that furthers their disciplines while also addressing pressing issues of the City. They need to be able to draw (as a magnet would) collaborators from all sectors – business, neighborhoods, government, schools, not-for-profits. We require a strong synergy between the “work” of the campus and the “work” of the community to ensure that our collaborations are sustainable, that they are far more than one-shot service learning projects. We want projects that can dramatically increase the creative engagement of campus and community, that can eventually change how Syracuse looks and functions. We have kept an eye toward taking down the barriers – both real and symbolic – that divide people and obscure hope.

Working with a wide range of collaborators, we are building an arts zone, something that can be seen as well as experienced on the landscape of our city. We're calling it the Connective Corridor, and this zone links downtown Syracuse with the university and other institutions up on the hill. The Urban Video Project is situated on buildings along this Corridor, and so are all of the city's major cultural and civic institutions, as well as its grass-roots arts and cultural organizations.

One portion of the Connective Corridor, “the Civic Strip,” includes not only the Everson Museum of Art but the Civic Center in which the Syracuse Symphony and the Syracuse Opera companies perform. As we light up the physical infrastructure of the Strip, we will also draw new audiences to artistic collaborations. Paul Taylor, our wonderful alum, will bring his company for a residency with us next fall, performing a new piece commissioned by the Mellon Foundation to honor Paul's 80th birthday, with live music by the Symphony and a crossing of dance and music audiences to create new synergies in this creative campus/community.

And speaking of new happenings, at the far end of this Corridor, we purchased one of the ugliest buildings in town, an old furniture warehouse that looked like a giant gray cube of cement. We asked another alum, architect Richard Gluckman, to transform it, and today it is filled with windows, light, wonderful rooms, a café, community arts spaces and public gallery spaces.

The Warehouse has been the home to our School of Architecture and its Upstate Design Center, and now to all of our design programs, from industrial to communication design, including an inter-disciplinary design lab, called CO-LAB. Overnight, hundreds of students began taking buses up and down the Corridor every day, and many of them stay downtown late into the evening. The Warehouse area has come alive and is anchoring galleries, shops, downtown condominiums and new office buildings.

This keeps evolving. The Corridor has extended past The Warehouse, to the Near West Side, one of Syracuse's poorest neighborhoods with a long-standing Latino/a community, where many new partnerships have formed to do Green renovations on dozens of homes for existing residents, renovate old and vacant warehouses for artists and performance spaces, build schools

as centers of community and sustainable food markets and La Casita (a Latino/a Cultural Center).

Building a Creative Campus/Community

It may seem strange that, in a meeting of arts presenters where the traditional focus presumably is on the performing arts as they can happen anywhere, I have started with attention to *place*, to the *geography of the arts*, as a springboard for the *social or human* creative connections that constitute the real basis for community and for transformational experience. In this regard, I am reminded of the wonderful work of social-legal theorist, Susan Sturm at Columbia, who writes about achieving transformations of institutions, principally universities, in terms of the “*architecture of inclusion*,” how we deliberately design, give substance and solidity, to the inclusive communities and democratic culture befitting a diverse society.⁸

I am also inspired by the possibilities for change coming with the Obama era and in particular with what it would mean to embed the arts throughout the stimulus package for a new America, evoking the great public works projects of eras gone by, as well as the backdrop of “brother can you spare a dime,” that cements our work to build conscious connections across the ever-growing chasms of the haves and the have nots.

Geography also brings us back to technology, to what it means to opt-in, to connect in strong, substantive ways that can be sustained. And, inevitably, geography reminds us of the local/global resonances of the stage on which we play, the importance of the nuanced local in our social landscape, and the sweep of the global, as issues, conflicts, peoples connect across time and space, ever more frequently.

So how do we go about building such places, in a landscape of collaborations that connect us creatively and that use the arts (broadly defined) to construct a community for change? Here are my personal guidelines, meant to provoke discussion:

Go Big. When I think of building creative places, I think of a task force I served on for the National Science Foundation years ago on “civil infrastructure.” As the social psychologist in a room of engineers, presumably brought in to humanize the project, I asked for a definition of civil infrastructure, and it has stuck with me ever since – *large things attached to the ground*. Although we don’t want to limit our art to grounded works, it does seem apt to me that we start big – drawing in many disciplines, many sectors of the community, many cultural groups, many histories and geographies, and many generations. This can be done in the context of our “normal” mode of arts presenting, but it must be done intentionally to be large, expansive, and inclusive. It must be done in ways that lead to collaborative connections that can be sustained, not to the – if you will pardon my provocation -- one-offs, short term projects that are inspiring and eye-opening but not always sufficiently grounded in the world and ambitious enough in their expanse, to create the civil infrastructure of the creative campus/community.

⁸ Susan Sturm, "The Architecture of Inclusion: Interdisciplinary Insights on Pursuing Institutional Citizenship," 29 *Harvard Journal of Law & Gender* 247 (2006) 248-334.

We all have a sense of what it means to go big and create grounded and expansive creative connections. When I think about my own creative campus/community in this regard, I think of our upcoming collaboration with Shen Wei Dance Arts, directed by the choreographer whose work was seen by billions of TV viewers in the first seven minutes of the Olympics in August, with dancers "streaming through space as fluidly as ink on a brush," to quote Sarah Kaufman of *The Washington Post*.⁹

Our collaboration will include multiple residencies, underwritten in part by a grant from the New York Council of the Arts, serving multiple purposes and reaching many constituencies, on and off campus. These will range from students in the Syracuse public schools to honors undergraduates who know nothing about dance--- but will learn a great deal---to students in our interdisciplinary public diplomacy and public communications program.

Shen Wei's company, which will move to Syracuse from Duke University, will be rehearsing a piece about the Silk Road, the third part of a triptych that includes performances centered on Tibet and on Cambodia. While they're in residence, Anna Kisselgoff, the retired dance critic for *The New York Times* who has taken an interest in Shen Wei, will visit for a week to share a critic's perspectives with musical theater and arts journalism students. She'll also speak with honors students taught by the ethnomusicologist Carol Babiracki.

As an extension of this residency, we plan to host Shen Wei next fall for a performance of his entire triptych at a grand old theater downtown. During this time, we'll hear from panels invited by our Public Diplomacy Program to discuss cultural diplomacy, and we'll incorporate our first year students into the experience through our campus-wide "shared reading" experience – borrowing a page from the wonderful work that Pam Tatge did several years ago at Wesleyan University with a shared experience for incoming students with Bill T. Jones.

In our case, this whole affair is being coordinated by Carole Brzozowski, the former dean of our College of Visual and Performing Arts, who has taken on a new created position for SU of University Arts Presenter specifically to bring about community partnerships and weave them into the university structure.

The Shen Wei collaboration is important to us in many ways beyond its extraordinary artistic merit. It involves areas of disciplinary strength across campus, and it reinforces many off-campus partnerships that use the language of the arts, design, and technology for dialogue in a multicultural city that has sometimes lost its voice. This point brings me to the second critical element of building campus/community spaces/places.

Authenticity. In any community and on any campus there are many possible histories that can cement the arts in authentic connections, and it is up to us to find and showcase them. This year Syracuse Stage presented a piece – Tales from the Salt City-- created and directed by Ping Chong and spoken and acted by seven "ordinary" (though extraordinary) Syracuse citizens, some of them immigrants and others deeply embedded for generations. What was so moving

⁹ Sarah Kaufman, "Shen Wei's Olympic Feet: Soaring to Artistic Heights, *The Washington Post* (October 30, 2008) C3.

and so galvanizing in this performance were the interwoven threads of their stories, their struggles for justice and a secure place, their visions of hope, and their power to cross boundaries.

Authentic stories can come from anywhere and still resonate in local communities. The national consortium of engaged artists and scholars, Imagining America, is collaborating with Partners for Arts Education, a Syracuse-based organization, in an effort to create such conscious connections. The first phase, "The Hyphenated Artist Series," drew a wide range of artists and performers who speak to cities such as ours, seeking revitalization in so many ways.

The audience was involved from the beginning. Rather than implant an artist and hope there would be some interest, the Syracuse partners began by asking community organizations what they wanted from artists and performers and discussed with them some artists who might meet their needs. Members of a labor union, for example, wanted to hear from an artist who made workers seem like human beings, and one of those invited was Marty Pottenger, a solo performance artist and union activist currently working in Portland, Me.

The artist Jerry Beck discussed his work with the Revolving Museum's yearlong public art series and urban revitalization project in Lowell, Ma. Cristal Brown of Urban Bushwomen brought the untold and under-told histories of disenfranchised people to light through dance, resonating not only with the many refugee populations who have come to Syracuse but also with the long-standing disenfranchised of our city and region, including residents of the Onondaga Nation, the original makers of place in Syracuse.

Conscious connections and authentic tales. Some are easy. Some are not. As Tim Bond, Producing Artistic Director of the Syracuse Stage and our Department of Drama, aptly notes, we've been making these connections since people sat around the fire together and told stories thousands of years ago, and they are an authentic launching pad for the arts as a catalyst to institutional and community transformation.

Sustainability. What does it take, then, to sustain these conscious connections through the arts? This is, in my view, the most important question to constantly keep front and center. It's easy to forget that powerful communication, collaborations, and changes can be short lived without some "structural" commitments on all sides. By structural, I mean several investments that signal the creative campus/community's equivalent of civil infrastructure.

First, and not surprisingly, both campus and community partners – university departments, non-profits, neighborhood groups – really need to view these creative connections/endeavors as mission-critical, as contrasted with what Steve Tepper has called an "arts by default" status quo. From the campus side, this means embedding arts presenting in the curriculum, as so many of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's Creative Campus Initiative projects do, and as Imagining America's Culture and Community Development in Higher Education project also supports.¹⁰ Moreover, this work has to be seen as central to the discovery

¹⁰ Arlene Goldbard, "The Curriculum Project Report: Culture and Community Development in Higher Education," published by Imagining America, 2008, p 2.

work of interested faculty, even when it takes them into collaborations beyond the boundaries of their disciplines and even of the academy, and so we need metrics and processes for evaluating excellence in this engaged work and rewarding it at tenure time, as Imagining America's Tenure Team Initiative also has been studying in convenings and reports across the country.¹¹ At times, we also need to be prepared to actually build the creative campus/community equivalent of civil infrastructure, as we have done in downtown Syracuse and as Rensselaer has done on its campus in the Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center that speaks directly to the breadth of conscious connections between the arts, science, design, and technology.

If conscious connections are to be transformative, they need many partners and real investments from the community/ies---significant ownership on all sides, not just the campus acting in the patron role of the Medicis. The campus has to be clear that it is committed to sustainability, since there will always be rightful suspicions that patronage dries up when times get hard – and we will all certainly test that theory in the current economic landscape. At the same time, when the community begins to see, for example, the arts, technology, and design, as part of its economic (as well as cultural) development agenda, which is now beginning to happen in Syracuse, then businesses, neighborhoods, schools, faith institutions, non-profits of all kinds, and government of all kinds, become the likely partners and sustainability becomes possible.

Growth. With sustainability comes growth, and by that I point in particular to the critical task of engaging and attracting the next generation, on campus and in the schools of our communities. Schools can be centers of community hope instead of dismay. When hundreds of SU students engaged our Literacy through the Arts Programs in the Syracuse City Schools---working to help creative work flourish in wildly under-resourced urban schools and decaying school buildings---I knew that we were beginning to cement the civil infrastructure of our creative campus/community. Now we have a district wide school reform project, in collaboration with the Say Yes to Education Foundation and the Syracuse City School District, that calls the achievement gap what it really is – an opportunity gap – and focuses in part on the opportunities in the arts broadly defined that inner city students miss while their middle-class peers in nearby schools take to full advantage.¹²

As part of this comprehensive school reform project, which we call “Syracuse Say Yes to Education and Economic Development,” for example, dancers and actors and artists from the Community Folk Art Center, which is part of our Department of African American Studies, are going into six elementary schools every day and working, sometimes in Spanish, with children from kindergarten through third grade with visual and expressive arts, everything from digital photography to dance and African drumming. Every child can participate.

As Kheli Willetts the director of the folk art center told me, the artists involved realize that this is "not about them, not about building resumes or expertise, but about empowering young children, creating young artists, and getting them excited."

¹¹ Julie Ellison and Timothy Eatman, *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University*, Imagining America, 2008. See also Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, “Taking Public Scholarship Seriously,” *The Chronicle Review*, Volume 52, Issue 40, B20.

¹² <http://partnership.syr.edu/Partnership/uploads/Say%20Yes%20to%20Education%20overview.pdf>.

Conscious Creative Connections for the Future

And this is both where I'll end and where we all need to begin – with the democratizing role of the creative campus/community, its powerful *social* connectivity and the ways in which successful efforts of these sorts can change realities – after all, isn't that what creativity is all about?

At the very heart of a creative campus and a creative community is the next generation of talent, innovators, and audience – our students on campus and our children in the schools of our communities.

The arts can span the divides created by age, ethnicity, culture, and class, and they are powerful engines for hope.

They can open up the blind alleys in which talented children and youth from the inner city often find themselves, and they can open the eyes of the university community to the great possibilities that lie in the untapped neighborhoods next door.

They can evoke authentic tales of times gone by and create the fabric, the infrastructure, of the new tales ready and waiting to be woven.

It takes a great deal of deliberate work, but then social justice--- even economic transformation---doesn't come without hard work. The arts inspire, uplift, sometimes outrage, and always speak to others waiting to hear and to talk back. We all need that back talk, and again, as Twyla Tharp noted, we can run away in these experiences without leaving home. In fact, I hope that many of us won't leave home, because there is so much to be done in our own backyards.