

**Highlights from a One Day Gathering on
Cultural Organizing and Climate Solutions
November 3, 2011**

The Context: Education and persuasion based strictly on data are not sparking a public awakening on climate change. We urgently need new approaches that hold the promise of unleashing human purpose, courage, and action. Music and art have always been central to social change. Over the past few years, musicians, artists, and cultural leaders have begun to experiment with new approaches to public engagement to build a powerful movement for climate solutions and a more just, sustainable future. These artists build on a long history of cultural leadership for social change.

History is not the only guidepost or rationale for a new approach to building political will for change. Recent cognitive science and evolutionary psychology have opened up fresh insights about our primal emotions, herding and tribal instincts, and the role of mental framing and cultural narratives. We are a far less rational set of actors than we'd like to think. How do we tap the need for identity and belonging as we do our public outreach? This retreat was designed to explore cultural approaches to tapping human potential and catalyzing action for transformational change.

The Goals:

- Deepen our collective understanding of lessons from other movements
- Informally map some of the many cultural organizing projects in support of climate solutions
- Explore the leading "edge" of this field and deepen our understanding of how to link arts with sophisticated communications, advocacy, and social media
- Share case studies and build relationships among numerous artists
- Brainstorm on needs and opportunities for strengthening this field of work

Overview: On November 3, 2011 the Chorus Foundation sponsored a full day meeting at the SohoSoleil Loft in New York City. Farhad Ebrahimi, Betsy Taylor, Cuong Hoang, and Lauren Nutter organized and facilitated the meeting. This planning group reached out and identified numerous musicians, artists, filmmakers, photographers, theater groups, festival producers, chefs and other artists working to raise public awareness about the threat of climate change and the promise of clean energy.

Brief Highlights:

- **There are important lessons from other movements.** We do this work for many reasons. Former steelworker, musician, and labor organizer Joe Uehlein focused on why we sing and tell stories as part of the struggle for societal change. "We seek to build solidarity, foster community, and transform fear and despair into hope and determination. We garner press attention to reach millions. We invite deep contemplation and pose hard questions. Artists can speak truth and poke fun in ways that analysts cannot. We can inspire people to dedicate their lives to change."

Caron Atlas, director of the Arts & Democracy Project, pointed to the extraordinary power of music and art in the rebuilding of New Orleans and the fight for justice in the wake of the disaster. “This work was rooted in community. Cultural organizing was inseparable from the larger struggle for change.” Atlas, Uehlein and other participants reflected on the many lessons from other movements. Some include:

- The importance of physical places where people connect in their communities to protest, celebrate, and claim or create their cultural traditions. Black churches provided safe spaces for strategy meetings and movement building through singing during the civil rights struggle. Campuses and coffee houses were central to the peace movement. Community art cooperatives were critical for the Women’s liberation movement when women were excluded from most galleries and museums. Occupy Wall Street and flash mobs are dynamic examples of this today.
- The centrality of music and art in building confidence and power. “Solidarity Forever,” “We Shall Overcome,” and “Give Peace a Chance” expressed the optimism and power of the labor, civil rights, and peace movements. The Freedom Singers were never big stars, but they helped fuel the Civil Rights movement. Shepard Fairey’s Obama “Hope” silkscreen during the 2008 election captured America’s yearning for a more visionary politics.
- The role of handmade crafts and clothing designed and made by vulnerable communities or in new sustainable ways and then sold nationally or globally to generate income and to simultaneously build awareness and solidarity.
- The use of art to reveal our shared experience of pain and suffering, letting us know we are not alone and providing glue to hold us together. The ability to transform politics from a dry to a celebratory affair, using tools of laughter, sexuality, and beauty to coax people to cultural events where they experience, often for the first time, the power of social solidarity and political awakening. The My Lai massacre photos, the Kent State photos, and conversely the photos of the massive march on Washington in support of the civil rights movement all captured deeply shared emotions of grief and hope.
- The power to confront reality in fresh ways. Act Up was and is critical to the struggle to fight AIDS. Occupy Wall Street challenges greed directly rather than through corrupted political institutions.
- The appeal to our better nature, reminding us that love and joy are more powerful than hatred and violence.
- The involvement of celebrity artists and bands. Celebrities have played a vital role in shining a spotlight on abuse and in reaching larger audiences and inspiring action. Sometimes high profile artists fail to foster community based power and movement building. Powerful movements align with well known and lesser known artists. This happened in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.
- Films, documentaries and viral videos can reach millions with critical messages. Will.I.Am’s Yes We Can video, A Coal Miner’s Daughter, Erin Brockovich, Silkwood, The China Syndrome, King Corn, Gasland, Inside Job, Brokeback Mountain, Crash, An Inconvenient Truth, Bowling for Columbine, Avatar, Fast Food Nation, and WALL-E all raised questions and awareness.

Sometimes humor is the key. Tina Fey's impersonation of Sarah Palin reached over eleven million people. Viral social media has taken this to a new level; smart phones now challenge the corporate media's representation of reality with real time photos and films of protests, human sufferings and movement triumphs.

- **People and groups are in a period of healthy experimentation.** Participants argued that the environmental community has invested overwhelmingly in analytic, policy, think tank and insider strategies while ignoring culture. The climate and environmental organizations are characterized by leaders who focus overwhelmingly on influencing elites through information. They draw their identity and sense of inclusion from the mastery of data and complex policy proposals. This has merit, but too often, we have ignored what families talk about, what communities actually care about, and failed to inspire or connect to a sense of vision and purpose rooted in heart. Many are now working to address this core challenge. The group mapped many existing cultural programs and projects focused on climate justice and solutions. These are included in a resource guide available by contacting laurennut@gmail.com. Ian Inaba of Citizen Engagement Lab described some of the cutting edge experimentation in the field. He pointed to several critical issues:
 - Memes matter. A dynamic meme involves an idea, behavior or style that spreads from person to person within a culture. The notion, first coined by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, is that memes can mutate and self-replicate. "We are the 99%" became a household phrase in less than two months. It captured the public's imagination and changed the national debate. Inaba described this and the AdBusters open invitation to just show up and start occupying Wall Street as an extremely powerful meme and dynamic approach to movement building. "Adbusters invited people to show up and asked them to figure out for themselves what to do." The Tea Party was/is a powerful meme. Arab Spring is another. What's the equivalent for the climate movement?
 - We must do more to promote climate solutions. Stories about the end of the world, sea level rise, dying species, and disappearing water do not successfully build the movement. Fear is an important ingredient for action, but we need a greater focus on the world we believe we can co-create together. Artists can help visualize and evoke the future we want.
 - We need to experiment with short formats. The news cycle never stops. Artists need to be able to respond rapidly with extremely short but dynamic formats to contest false descriptions of reality and to offer rapid reactions that can go viral with digital media.
 - Some of the best work is happening in communities of color. Presente.org started as a small group of ten leaders and quickly morphed into a movement of 250,000 Latinos dedicated to a more just and sustainable future.
 - A growing number of progressive groups are experimenting with linking arts, organizing, and service delivery to support ongoing engagement. Credo, Moveon.org, and New Organizing Institute are building partnerships with Citizens Engagement Lab. The Engage Network, Casa de Maryland, National

Day Laborer Organizing Network, and many groups working on AIDS and HIV issues have been linking these three domains with success.

- **Artists working on climate issues struggle with several challenges and needs.**
 - Artists often don't know how to connect with organizations, innovative businesses, elected officials or movements that can best use their work. Similarly, they often need deeper interaction with scientists, activists, or advocates to ensure that their lyrics or themes are relevant and useful. One participant felt she needed more feedback from climate experts to make sure her theatrical narrative was as powerful and accurate as possible.
 - We need infrastructure and easy mechanisms to tap the massive creative talent that wants to help. Citizen Engagement Lab and Air Traffic Control are working with several others to address this need and opportunity. The private sector may have lessons for the non-profit sector and artists need to be connected to the most cutting edge business practices and leaders working for a sustainable future.
 - Many artists hope that their work will generate action in the world. Exhibits, concerts, productions and festivals need to be connected to on-the-ground follow up. There need to be easy ways for artists and advocates to find each other and to collaborate. Some sort of open source way of sharing best practices, cultural tools, and dynamic projects would be helpful.
 - In general, cultural work for social change is under-valued by the philanthropic world. There is a great need for financial support that recognizes the less tangible yet powerful role of music, art, and film in building a movement's power.
 - Many artists feel the entire climate meme and frame is flawed and that there is a need for a new unifying narrative.
 - Many artists feel isolated. Several feel that non-profit groups see artists as something to "use" rather than as partners who can help shape strategy. Artists need stronger connections with other leaders working for change.

- **There are many opportunities for strengthening the field.** The group broke into two groups and brainstormed about opportunities for maximizing the power of cultural organizing for climate solutions. There were several ideas:
 - Encourage every progressive organization to have a cultural director to spur a greater focus on employing the arts for social change. Recognize artists as leaders with unique gifts and vision rather than as people to be called in at the last minute to raise money or help tactically.
 - Use competitions and prizes to help identify high quality cultural programs and art focused on building public resolve for bold climate solutions.
 - Consider having a multi-media production or traveling festival or concert/teach-in that tells the story of root causes of climate change, the promise of the solutions, and offers individuals concrete steps for taking action in all spheres of life. Use

art to show the solutions that are actually already moving forward and use stories of success to build hope and momentum. Help people see the larger system that is fueling ecological collapse. Make the production relevant to local communities and to local cultural, economic, and meteorological conditions. Create a spirit of fun and celebration, inviting people to be part of something that supports and affirms them.

- Hold a briefing for potential donors and foundations to showcase high quality case studies and solicit funds to build the field.
- Be expansive and inclusive in involving diverse artists from a variety of ethnic and artistic backgrounds.
- Support longer retreats that bring cultural organizers and high quality artists together with other leaders to brainstorm and share strategies for rapidly transforming our fossil fuel economy.
- Build connections between the many cultural projects on climate change from around the world. Link sister cities with climate arts programming. Create an on-line climate art multi-media museum/gallery that gathers music, sculpture, photography, green design, etc. together in one place. Create a site with social networking tools. Help artists connect their work to create a more powerful public roar for change.
- Experiment with more spontaneous and communal art experiences and share best practices. When something works, help it replicate rapidly. Make things fun. People will be attracted to us if we're having a great time.
- Help people understand the role of consumerism and economic growth, not just global warming. Enlist artists to develop a new narrative. Develop art and music that promotes community-based problem solving. Work for policy and structural change, but also take advantage of the "do it ourselves" theory of change that is gaining traction as people see little hope for bold action by the federal government or the private sector. The Queens Museum exhibit on red-lining is a case study that was mentioned. Consider linking community "fellows" to any artistic or musical production.
- Consider aligning with truly sustainable companies and industries to help move a narrative for a positive future, using music, arts, and story-telling.
- Create soundtracks of famous and less famous artists to raise money for the climate movement and help reach the public.
- Find spaces for artists to collaborate around visionary multi-media projects.
- Do more to link the 99% meme and fundamental questions of justice and equity with the climate movement. Keep a focus on people, not just the planet
- Do more to bridge between the developed and developing world, showcasing solutions in the developing world that might be brought to the U.S. and vice versa.

- Shift the frame from cost of action to the cost of inaction with a positive vision and focus.
- Utilize science fiction as a means of connecting to people.
- Build a culture of inquiry, experimentation, and risk taking. Risk failure. Don't play it safe.
- Get clear about what we want people to do. Help artists connect and make "asks" of their audiences in dynamic ways.
- Use the arts as a channel for promoting new messengers and recruiting new voices to the climate issue. Seek out models that allow for co-creation and open source movement building.
- Ask the right questions. *What does the new economy look like?* This is one of those questions! Help people be awake to reality. Challenge complexity.
- Use art and cultural organizing to help the movement emotionally and spiritually. Help people transcend grief and despair and to experience inter-connection and personal calm in the midst of global chaos.
- Dedicate resources to funding climate art -- right now we pay activists and policy staff, but we expect artists to donate their time and work.

Art is a critical complement to activism. Information and education are critical, but inspiration is what often helps humans transcend seemingly impossible situations.

Participants:

<u>Name:</u>	<u>Affiliation:</u>
Caron Atlas	Arts & Democracy Project
James Tanabe	Formerly with Cirque du Soleil, currently MA and MBA candidate at the University of Pennsylvania
Molly Sturges	Little Globe
Bun Lai	Miya Sushi, chef
Gary Braasch	Environmental photographer
Jean Caiani	Speak Out Now
Rouwenna Lamm	Alliance for Climate Education
Joe Uehlein	Voices for a Sustainable Future, the Labor Network for Sustainability, and the CultureWorks Collective
Shalini Kantayya	7th Empire Media
Sharon Abreu	Irthlingz Arts-Based Environmental Education
Ian Inaba	Citizen Engagement Lab
Jim Ahearne	Maine Organic Farmers and Gardners Association Common Ground Fair
Whit Jones	Energy Action Coalition
Phil Aroneanu	350.org
Zach Postone	3rd Ward Brooklyn
Martin Rosengaard	Wooloo

Jamie Laurie	Flobots
Andy Hobsbawm	Do the Green Thing
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