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His question got us thinking. Both of us have a background in artistic practice (Paloma in the visual arts, and Melinda as a singer and musician). The arts often raise consciousness about issues and identify or name public problems, but we thought they also do more, which made us want to explore Mathews’ question more deeply.

We both had a sense of the long history of socially and politically engaged art, and we had noticed a number of arts organizations describing themselves as promoting democracy or civic engagement. While Kettering had worked with artists or individuals who have used photography or film in their work, we had never taken a focused look at the role of the arts in community problem solving.

As we were listening to participants in Kettering research exchanges, we started to hear more about the arts than we had anticipated: a participant working in a rural community decided to use a play to discuss difficult health issues; a community organization has used an art installation as part of an effort to name and frame community issues; a playwright and community member wrote a humorous play about fracking to break through the polarization in her community.

We felt that the foundation was missing something that was happening everywhere—people using their artistic capacities, not as a replacement for the hard work of addressing their shared problems, but rather as an integral part of that work.
Kettering has long explored the role that civic organizations play in public life. We have found that one of the barriers to people having a stronger hand in shaping their collective future is the lack of civic organizations acting as vehicles for them to come together to address shared problems. Many civic organizations have instead become overly professionalized and focused on their internal programming and demonstrating results, rather than working in response to and with the community in which they are located. We thought it might be worth finding out whether arts organizations—and the arts more broadly—are responding to this challenge. And, if they are, how?

We started reading everything we could get our hands on about the role of the arts in community problem solving, and we started contacting others who were studying this work—and doing it on the ground. After a lot of literature reviews, e-mails, and phone calls, as well as many conversations with our colleagues, we felt ready to convene an exploratory research exchange. In November 2012, we held the very first Civic Capacity and the Arts exchange at our offices in Dayton, Ohio. We brought together a mixed group, some of whom identified as artists or worked with arts organizations in communities; others who had participated in previous Kettering exchanges and had used some sort of artistic practice in the work they were doing in their communities.

Arts in Everyday Life

While we had anticipated that such a diverse group might result in people talking past each other, that didn’t turn out to be the case. In fact, many lamented the separation of the arts from daily life and its relegation to a sphere of entertainment primarily for elites. One participant talked about compartmentalization as the disease of our era. Kettering talks about professionalization or the plethora of professional silos and the compartmentalization of knowledge itself. This seems to have made it increasingly difficult to talk across difference—different perspectives, experiences, fields, disciplines; it both affects people’s ability to come together to address shared problems, as well as limits the way institutions engage with other institutions and the professionals in them.

Some of the artists talked about the difficulty of being invited into communities as a “fixer,” when their interest—and the interest of some arts organizations—is really in creating opportunities for people to discover their own “fixes.” Others spoke about the problem of art being seen exclusively as the artifact or performance that is produced, rather than as a larger process for creating something together. There was the distinction made between monological and dialogical experiences, between artist-designed and civic-designed. We also talked about the challenge of creating authentic public spaces, which all communities need to thrive.

This exchange led to others, and after several years of research, we can say that yes, the arts can—and often do—play a critical role in the work of citizens. We’ve seen many illustrations. As 2015 comes to a close, we are preparing to share some reports that have grown out of an 18-month exchange with arts organizations scattered throughout the country. One paper, by Animating Democracy, considers “how artists, cultural organizations, and creative strategies can contrib...
The arts have an ability to tap into other ways of knowing. As Esther Farmer wrote in her article “Strange Bedfellows: Community Development, Democracy, and Magic” in a 2015 issue of Community Development, “Traditional models of democratic debate have tended to privilege abstract, ‘disembodied’ forms of reason. . . . These kinds of disembodied environments that are overly intellectualized and abstract are dangerous on two fronts; they engender boredom, the enemy of enthusiasm, creativity, and imagination (i.e. magic), and even worse, these heady environments can also engender feelings of resentment and inadequacy.” Another participant, a professor of communication studies who has been collaborating with a visual artist, speaks about his concern with the professionalization of dialogue and deliberative work. His collaborations with a visual artist are born of a desire to explore the full range of democratic participation.

Another ongoing theme has been the power of imagination. While an important democratic capacity is the ability to make sound collective decisions, another important capacity is to be able to imagine beyond one’s experience. Many see this as a key role for the arts. For some, art creates a space for play and imagination, which can open up new options and possibilities to explore. At the same time, art can be a word that leaves some people out. It can feel exclusionary.

A powerful example of sparking imagination is a board game, BUILT, which was created by Sojourn Theatre, a company comprised of 15 artists scattered throughout the United States. The game is designed to stimulate community engagement through more productive conversations around urban planning. Players imagine the necessary physical structures of a place, as well as think about how we live together in it. All communities need a park and a library, but they also need places like a water treatment plant and a courthouse. How can we imagine an ideal community—and make it ideal for all? The idea is to encourage people to see cities (or perhaps all com-
Communities) as resulting from complex decision-making processes over time.

We’re also learning about the role of the arts in stimulating public deliberation on public problems. In Flint, Michigan, Shop Floor Theatre Company was created to develop plays to encourage community deliberation on local problems, such as arson and the city being under emergency management. Since then, the company has gone on to create a documentary based on the experiences of international students in American universities, and they continue to use theater as a way to give voice to disparate experiences with a given issue and as a means for stimulating public conversations.

Building Democratic Muscles

Again and again, we’ve heard that the practice of working with others to literally create something together can help build up “democratic muscles.” Making something together can create a sense of ownership as well as a sense of collective identity. As one participant said in a research exchange, “When I do things, they are embedded in me in a different way than when I am just talking in a head space.”

The research has continued to evolve. Many foundations and municipal governments are funding “creative placemaking” initiatives that incorporate the arts in efforts to build vibrant communities. In the summer of 2015, we held a research exchange with a group of people to look at the democratic potential in these creative placemaking efforts. The organizations we brought together are all trying to ensure that citizens in community drive the work.

As a new area of Kettering’s research, it has generated enormous energy and expanded the networks with whom we exchange. As with all of our work, the questions we are asking overlap with other areas of research. For example, in Kettering’s community politics research, cooperative extension agents began experimenting with the arts in naming and framing issues to encourage more members of the community to participate in solving public problems.

We’ve seen art affect the work of citizens in myriad ways; each discovery has opened up new questions. As we continue to move forward in this work, we’ve been thrilled to find experiments not only across the United States but also around the world. Insights about the role of the arts don’t just come from artists and arts organizations but from other professionals and organizations. They are created in community themselves.

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