



MAKING IT BETTER

Folk Arts in Pennsylvania Today

Creating Social Change and Awareness

Experimenting at Disaster's Edge: Thoughts on Folk Arts of Social Change

by Debora Kodish

Consider some Pennsylvanians (ordinary people like ourselves) who work for social change. Opening their hearts to struggle, they refuse to stand silent. Objecting to disastrous policies and practices, they create alternatives, often against great odds. Holding themselves accountable, they labor for justice.

For this work, they use such unlikely tools as song, paint, needle, thread, and sand. What can viewers of this exhibition learn from the example of diverse people engaged in this way, in and outside this show? These homemakers, monks, mechanics, day laborers, students, and everyday people who entwine folk arts and social justice: How does their work open our eyes? These are hard times, in this state and around the globe. We need to know what they are doing, and why, and how.

Losang Samten was a Buddhist monk in Tibet before Chinese crackdowns forced him and his family to flee home. People respond differently to violence and abuse. We reason, resist, endure, and explode in returning violence. Losang's practice of sand mandala is a practice of peace and loving-kindness, breath of life and hope. He paints a mandala of colored sand, its intricate patterns representing spiritual truths I can only imagine. The sound of this work mesmerizes. His metal tool rubs against metal cone (chakpo), singing grains of sand flow. The beauty is inevitably temporary: impermanent, but still profound. We may be surprised to find that we can carry it inside us. This exiled art makes momentary sacred space in unimagined distant places (like our hearts). Regenerating symbolic and meaningful patterns, carrying teachings of generations of contemplation: we are all connected.

Patience, Losang teaches. Don't turn away, we learn. Stay and see how we are changed. However little we know about Tibet or bloody history or violence or Buddhism or Dharma, we take in something of all of this.



Folk arts — cultural traditions that we shape and share ourselves — can represent a kind of peoples' authority, far different from the perspectives of the powerful, of "authorities." (And far different from the count of elections, reality shows, and tweets.) When people are threatened, silenced, or oppressed, folk arts can carry forward radically alternative (and more inclusive) versions of history and culture. These folk arts are our messages — incomplete and decontextualized — to one another from the heart of struggle, out of heartbreak and hope. Often folk arts of social change are said to be weapons of the weak, in the sense that wit and resourcefulness and other materials at hand are used to address far larger coercive forces. For example, Joaquin Rivera wrote a *pleña* about the taking of homes in lower North Philadelphia in 2005. A song from the middle of trouble, this was a sound track accompanying peoples' efforts to stop eminent domain abuse: urban removals clearing neighborhoods for "development." That you most likely didn't hear Joaquin's song, and may not know about this particular privatization scheme is a reminder of the effort we have to spend if we want to know more than what mainstream media tell us about what's going on. The experiences of people in North Philadelphia are relevant in places across the commonwealth where predatory development schemes promise salvation while introducing toxins into the system.

Word does get out. Like Losang's mandala patterns, folk arts can have their own languages (not always easily read or understood by outsiders) with which certain things can be said and done. Folk arts can be a kind of back channel for free communication. No wonder, the many examples of drums, music and native

languages banned by repressive regimes, from slaveholders to Soviets to the U.S. government. The power of these mediums of expression, and of subordinated peoples' gathering and rising, are feared. During years of Soviet repression in Bosnia, Lithuania, Ukraine, the use of native language was forbidden. You couldn't sing traditional songs or own your grandmother's hymnal or a bible in Lithuanian. Or make or wear traditional clothing: all in the name of national reunification, or state-making, or emergency. Here is testimony that these arts endured: Vera Nakonechny's needlework, Bronius Krokys' Lithuanian folksongs and hymns, Mensura Berberovic's Bosnian sevdalinka, Alia Sheikh-Yousef's Palestinian tatreez, Kulu Mele African Dance and Drum Ensemble's latest production of Mali Sadjó. Do we wonder how particular suppressions are different from what neighbors feel today: afraid to wear an abaya or to admit ancestry, unable to travel, required to carry papers, subject to being pulled over / detained? What local voices and exquisite arts are suppressed here, now (that we may later wish we had aided with attention, notice or action?)

Our lives and fates are inextricably bound, and in complex ways. In Laos, Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun's family cooperated with the CIA who promised freedom to Hmong hill people. The costs were huge. How trustworthy were our promises, how welcoming our homes? Dispersed, displaced, resettled in Philadelphia's low hills: harmed and harassed, many Hmong moved on. What are the stories of Pang's extended family, her clan, and neighbors (not the Clint Eastwood version)? Three generations later, who stitches Hmong paj ndaub, needlework and for what purposes? And what do Hmong women stitch in Laos camps and here, bringing handwork to back doors, unacknowledged artisans? Why is a quilt worth less if stitched by Hmong hands? How is it less "American"? Upon whose hands and labor do our lives depend?

Sometimes, we find startling reorientations in a question or a different version of a story. Sometimes, change happens in our own lives when our sense of a story alters. Transformation narratives in countless social change movements mark moments when people become conscious of self, story and role in the context of larger narratives and when we rewrite our roles. You might say that transformation narratives emerge when we recognize something that had been hidden to us, that in some way oppresses, and from which some kind of deliverance is possible. A transformation narrative liberates. We find space, recognize others' experience as our own (even as we respect it as fully different and unique), feel more fully able to name who we are.



The right to name and be named correctly is a basic tool. Pose II, Dan Polanco, Steve Powers writing on walls, SEPTA cars, boxcars running rails through city and states. Getting their names out. Elaborating in masterpieces. Insisting they are there. They shake us into asking exactly what are the proper places to write and paint? Whose voices are disregarded? Whose property is this? Whose human rights count? Where and how do we sign our selves? It took courage for Frito Bastien to put images on canvas and board showing what was happening around him in Haiti. Vivid paintings allegorically chronicled the violence of the tontons macoutes terror squads, and the rapacious acts of greedy elites. (How could you paint such violence in the happy tones of Célestin Faustin, your teacher?) Only human giraffes haunt Haitian forests, eating everything in sight, destroying land and future. A courageous brush comments, shares what people know about common nightmare.

Folk arts are fundamentally collective. They represent the efforts and contributions of many, even as they are carried forward individually. Easy examples come from demonstrations when ordinary people gather, making struggles and demands public. Spiral Q artists open studios for "Justice Works" neighbors to make giant puppets in the style of Bread and Puppet theater and pageants, getting messages out on the street. Other aesthetics, and less formal studios — basements and kitchens — lie behind the Chester County mushroom workers signs demanding fair pay and safe working conditions under banners of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The drums of lion dancers resound in Chinatown accompanying people marching to demand that Philadelphia stop using this last community of color in our center city for the latest community-destroying development scheme: No Stadium in Chinatown, No casino in Chinatown. Chants leapfrog across movements: The people united will never be defeated. No justice, no peace. Equal pay for equal work.

Folk arts of social change are not only the province of specialists. Such slogans as those mentioned above— and our own everyday sayings, proverbs, words of wisdom— are all simple forms of collective action. When we voice such forms of quoted speech, we stand with others, carry shared learnings forward, and take our own positions. We are authors of justice, joining with others to name inequalities, to push back in ways small and large. To call it like it is. To take a stand. Folk arts of social change gain new authority with each use, traveling in back channels by word of mouth. This is folklore in our everyday lives, simple words that reference alternative versions – alternative experiences – of shared history.



In coming together in many different ways—by voicing others’ words or in demonstrations, in remembering and recreating, (and perhaps even in taking in these examples), it is said that we can practice, rehearse and enact freedom. Learning and playing African drums (when you are told that you are not “really” African), wearing your hair natural, speaking a first language: these community-visible acts are call and response. Individual acts make everyday differences and add into something larger. Movements and traditions are these acts lifted and joined by many.

Outside this exhibition, in the lives of those included here, hard struggles for justice and dignity continue. Some artists do everyday backbreaking dangerous work to make a living. No health care or benefits, discarded when use or accident disable. The issues inscribed in this exhibition are not simple, nor do they go away.

If this exhibition is useful, it will move us to consider how and when the collective wisdom, arts, and skills to which we have access might be resources for making a more equal, equitable world. It will stimulate our curiosity about the toolkits of our neighbors in the Commonwealth. And it will encourage us to consider what we value, in disastrous times.

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Additional resources

More information about Losang Samten, Joaquin Rivera, Vera Nakonechny, Bronius Krokys, Alia Sheikh-Yousef, Kulu Mele, Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun, Dan Polanco, Frito Bastien, and Chinatown lion dancers can be found at the Philadelphia Folklore Project website (www.folkloreproject.org) which includes links to magazine essays, documentary videos, and exhibitions featuring their works. Also see PFP’s exhibition on the Folk Arts of Social Change (1999). A list of anti-war signs and slogans can be found in that show (<http://www.folkloreproject.org/programs/exhibits/fasc/united.php#signs>). Information about Steve Powers is at <http://www.deitch.com/artists/sub.php?artistId=26>. For a brief history of the Farmworker Support Committee in Kennet Square, PA, see <http://www.cata-farmworkers.org/english%20pages/organizing.htm>