

How to Reimagine the World

Collaboration Principles for Artists & Social Justice Organizers

Developed by Micah Bazant, Forward Together, and CultureStrike



Cultural work opens crucial space to dream bigger and envision the worlds we want to create.

Imagine Black liberation movements without music, trans and queer freedom struggles without dance, immigrant justice movements without posters and murals. Art and culture are not just accessories to organizing, they are indispensable. Critical. The blood and fire of our movements. They sustain us and allow us to not only imagine, but to feel the world we are building together. Art touches us powerfully and immediately. It conveys our dreams, rage, and joy, in ways that data and petitions cannot. Artists in frontline and targeted communities expand our movements and cross social divides by uncovering truths, reimagining our stories, and engaging more people. Cultural work may not always result in easily measurable outcomes, but it opens crucial space to dream bigger and envision the worlds we want to create.



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As artists, we often want our work to have an impact and a life in the world. By collaborating with community organizers and organizations, artists can create work that challenges the confines of elite art markets, engages with history, and has deep meaning to communities alienated by traditional arts institutions. These collaborations can offer ways to redefine our creative work beyond individualism and competition, and to heal our relationship to our creative practice.

Be radically inclusive

We recognize everyone's capacity to create art and social change. Racism, anti-Blackness, Islamophobia, ableism, classism, transphobia, misogyny, and all structural oppressions, impact who is recognized as an artist and the value placed on their creative work. We aim to build a world where all people are supported to be creative; one that also nurtures and compensates artists to intensively develop their specific skills.

Build cultural equity and reparations

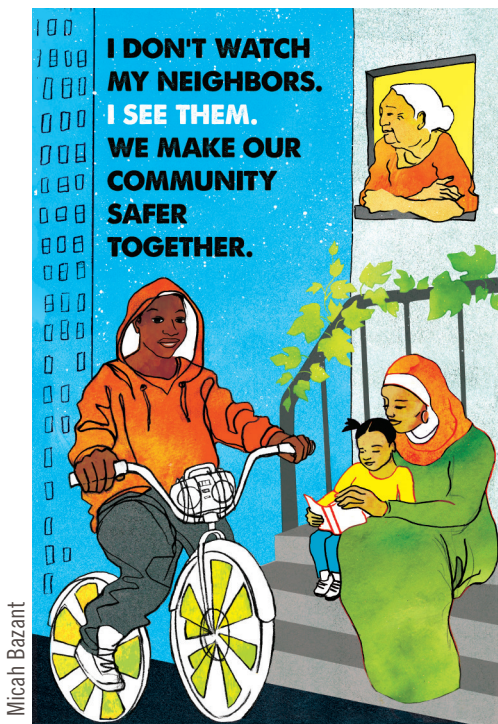
Artists from marginalized communities (e.g., Black, Indigenous, (im)migrant and undocumented, people of color, disabled, trans, queer, poor and working-class artists, etc.) face massive cultural inequity. This including lack of funding for arts education, inaccessible and discriminatory arts institutions, etc. White supremacy and colonization are driven by erasure and appropriation of entire cultures as well as the work of individual artists. We prioritize collaboration with artists from targetted communities, both to build cultural equity, and because their(/our) work is often more relevant and powerful for their(/our) own communities.



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“The fundamental unit of society is not the individual, it is the relationship”

—Movement Generation



Prioritize the wellbeing, self-determination and power of the individuals and communities represented

We value and support the creation of artwork and artistic practices that build the creative capital, power, and resources of the communities we represented in the work itself. We recognize that art can harm and even endanger marginalized communities—we do not exploit the people or communities centered in the work. We are ready to receive feedback, shift course, be accountable, and challenge our own biases.

Value and honor the labor of artists

Artists need to be credited, paid, and supported in long-term, sustainable ways. Jointly create written agreements outlining the terms of collaboration, for transparency, so everyone's needs are respected. Clarify timeline, roles, final products, payment, credit and licensing, dissemination, etc.

Put relationship building first

Just as relationship building is key to community organizing, cultural work is more powerful when it evolves through, and is accountable to, strong, authentic, non-transactional relationships. We prioritize partnerships with artists who have strong, existing relationships with the communities and grassroots organizing centered in the work. Long-term relationship building creates the trust and mutual understanding crucial for both large projects and rapid response.

Focus on the process

The process of creating art and building relationships is equally as important as the final product. We place emphasis on promoting healing, building relationships and capacity, sharing technical skills, and nurturing cultural leadership. Have courageous conversations that can challenge ingrained biases or ideas. Different projects will require different processes, some will be more participatory and collective than others.

Value the integrity and methodologies of both cultural work and organizing

Art-making is often (but not always) non-linear, intuitive, dreamy, and aesthetic. Organizing is often (but not always) linear, strategic, shifting, and timely. These methods are complementary. Art is not watered down for political aims. Political aims are not watered down for art. The integrity of both is essential to shift culture.

Be cooperative

We value cooperation and interdependence, not competition or exploitation. Both art and social change emerge through networks and generations of people, not by unique acts of genius or bravery by isolated individuals. Our work prioritizes connection in a creative ecosystem, mutual aid and mentorship between artists, and also between artists and organizers. We mentor and support new and emerging artists, and honor past and present teachers, traditions and lineage.

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Jess X Chen



Chucha Marquez



Be collaborative

Both artists and organizers must be engaged early in the conceptual development of the project. Artists are an integral part of the organizing process—our vision can shape the overall project and infuse creative strategy throughout every stage. Organizers can help insure that the work is appropriate, timely and strategic to specific struggles and campaigns. Artists can often reach large fan bases that are distinct from organizational constituents and networks.

Be flexible and strategic in tone and form

We need art that expresses our desire, grief, humor, curiosity, awe, etc., as well as more familiar activist expressions of outrage. And we need different art forms; dance, performance, writing, visual art, music, multimedia, etc., are all vital to social change. We share and remix art in different forms, helping it move fluidly between online/offline, public/private, activist/art spaces, creating powerful feedback loops that amplify our work and our movement.

These principles have emerged over the past five years through collaborations between Forward Together, CultureStrike, Micah Bazant and many other socially-engaged artists across the country. Our work includes national projects like Mamas Day, Trans Day of Resilience Art Project, Visions from the Inside, and many more. We humbly offer what we are learning and welcome your feedback. You are welcome to reprint or adapt this document, under a Creative Commons License, with credit to the original authors.