Co-Creative Diversion Programs for Justice Involved Youth:

Shaun Leonardo and Mark Strandquist in Conversation with Kaile Shilling

Shaun Leonardo and Mark Strandquist were both presenters at the Milwaukee Model symposium in November 2018. That year Leonardo and Strandquist were each selected as Ford Foundation Art for Justice Fund recipients for their work with justice and court-involved youth via Recess Assembly and *Performing Statistics*, respectively. They initiated a dialogue at the symposium that led to a conversation moderated by Kaile Shilling, a fellow Art for Justice Fund awardee, at the 2019 CREATE JUSTICE convening. Excerpts of that conversation, which address both the effectiveness and the limitations of their diversion practices, appear here.

Kaile Shilling [KS]: Mark, the *Performing Statistics* exhibit is really, really compelling for a lot of different reasons. It's interactive. It's got striking visuals. It offers an invitation to engage more deeply, and it seems both really professional and really authentic. Can you talk about how you actually went about building the project? Did you start with the art? Did you start with the policy? Where did you begin?

Mark Strandquist [MS]: As an artist I never want to be imposing my vision on a community. The parties I'm involved with always start with questions, and *Performing Statistics* began with us asking how criminal justice—juvenile justice reform—would differ if it were led by incarcerated youths and how could artists, lawyers, teachers, activists, and community member support the youths' vision for that system

transformation. For the first year of the project we didn't make anything—I mean, not with traditional art objects. We had conversations in which we were constantly asking who was missing, who was not at the table, where should this project go, whom should we be speaking to. And I think not bringing a fully realized vision to folks in Richmond created space for people to see themselves in the project. I think too often artists, nonprofits, community development groups, governments bring the solutions to a community and then are surprised when community members don't take them on.

And so that slow, intentional process of a sort of passionate uncertainty, acknowledging that we don't have the answers but that we have questions that we can answer together, that really helps build trust and the partnerships that have powered the project until today. We are going to be stewards of their story. So youth need to believe in us, to believe that we're going to honor what they put in and that they're going to be part of it.

Shaun Leonardo [SL]: I want to respond to two things you said that resonate with me in terms of the macro and micro level of doing this work—or you could say the philosophical positioning versus the granular work. When you say that you begin with questions, I think that's exactly what distinguishes this practice as art. It's ever-evolving: you're not attempting to reach particular solutions, or you don't have a vision for what is the right solution. That evolves with the practice and with community involvement.

In terms of the Recess Assembly work, the question that I led with is "How are our young people internalizing these narratives and messages of criminality?" And what continues to surprise me is that in terms of the diversion program at the court level,

young people come to us and they understand that they've been mandated to be in that space. And while we believe it's an opportunity, so often they're describing their own circumstances within the frame of criminality. They've already internalized the message that it was just a matter of time before they would get arrested.

And so we have to ask how that operates, how that trauma is existing within the body and mind, and then how might you replace that with a different narrative that is more subjective and maybe carries more meaning. Because it is our belief that with a firmer grasp or more agency in dictating how you describe your own circumstances and tell your own narrative you can start to move through life differently.

I wanted to hear from both of you about this idea because it seems that when we move through the practice, we always have to be mindful of these larger objectives, but at the beginning and the end of the day, it's the relationship building that moves the work. I always start with any core-mandated cohort by saying, "I'm not interested in your case, nor is this space one in which we're going to assess your innocence or guilt. I'm not interested in those circumstances at all. Just the opposite. Whatever we do here at the Assembly space will be a collaborative effort whose outcomes we determine. Let's move your involvement with the court aside and see what we can build together." That becomes the initiation, and the practice is always changing because you never know what the makeup of the work is going to be.

How do you address that actual, tangible trust-building work?

KS: I have found that there is something specific about the role of the arts that has a unique capacity to create that trust, to create authentic leadership opportunities for young

people, because it evens the playing field. I think there's something unique about it that enables authentic leadership and partnership.

SL: I want to connect to something that both of you said about how collaborative work is the only transparent way to even the playing field. We often don't give young people enough credit, but when you go in with a prescribed agenda, everyone in that space knows that they're working toward someone else's objectives.

MS: Yes.

SL: And I'm bringing this up particularly because in many ways the framework around youth justice is always to point to advocacy, and advocacy is inherent to this work, but not in the way that it points to someone else's activist agenda necessarily. Once we're in this space, it has to be codesigned, has to be determined, and what results in the short term is completely unknown.

KS: It was really interesting to hear your point, Shaun, that for that young person juvenile justice reform advocacy is not primarily about not incarcerating young people. It was more about "how do we validate my cultural experience?" So that's something that's really stuck with me too, that there is the justice reform piece, which is critical, and at the same time the cultural work is also about expanding what we see as valued cultural contributions.

SL: And I think that validation is what ultimately drives the work, right?

MS: Yeah.

SL: But just to get real for a moment and, again, piggybacking off of things that you've both said, when does it start to feel like we're performing for someone else's agenda? And I'll start with myself. There are times when we have to acknowledge—when I say, "we," I mean the team at Recess and myself—that in many respects we are satisfying a condition of the court when in fact philosophically we believe that many of these arrests shouldn't happen in the first place. And so we always have to hold ourselves accountable to the truth of the work, what is possible in the work, even though we are, again, performing in many respects an existing agenda.

KS: What you're bringing up here, Shaun, is this question of the responsibilities inherent in doing this work, both artistically and ethically.

MS: We often use the metaphor of triage versus surgery to frame our work. And we know that we're being used sometimes by systems. I mean, any time you're doing programming in a system, you're also allowing that system to say, "Look at the nice things we do for young folks," which is potentially allowing those systems to maintain themselves, potentially even to get funded, all these things. So performing someone else's agenda is very real, and there are times when that's a compromise that is worth making and other times when it's not. And so when are you being used in that way, it's

triage, it's providing needed engagement with the system. It is also providing moments of listening and understanding. That is important.

KS: Yeah. It's very much living in a gray space, and the arts are a great resource to navigate living in that kind of conflicted gray space.

SL: When we talk about the relationship that our young people have with the justice system, it's often as if the system is this monolith not made up of individuals, but we always have to remind ourselves that when we're connecting with police officers, probation officers, or corrections officers, they house trauma in their bodies as well. I think of art as the only real pathway that allows officers to dial into a place in their bodies where they understand that their feelings of safety, of community, of fear, of ambition are actually very much in line with what young people want in their own lives.

MS: In a recent training we had an officer break down in tears and open up after seeing a film and going through the VR with the teens. It triggered his own experiences. When he became an officer, he looked up his mother's arrest records. She had all these arrests for sex work, and he realized the lengths that she went to in order to take care of him. That completely reframed his concept of illegal or legal behavior. And it then sparked this amazing conversation among the officers themselves. So it is disruptive, in a healthy way. It disrupts identity. It disrupts stereotypes. It does all those things.

KS: I think the very way in which all of us have been talking about art is disruptive

because it's an invitation and a question and because it's asking to come into a community instead of a confrontation. And that very way of disrupting is disruptive. That is part of what I love about a lot of this, centering the art in this work.

MS: For both of us there is this idea that we are fighting against passivity in our work too. The audience might be officers or system folks, and it's also the young folks. Just bringing out that commonality is important, I think.

SL: One of the realities of this work is that you feel accountable and responsible. But at the end of the day I would argue that you have to first in your own capacity assure that the people closest to the work are walking around it and walking the streets safely and somehow that they feel that they have a fuller life. Without that core network of young people and practitioners, without that community feeling strong and safe, you're never going to be in a place where you're thinking about systemic change.

KS: What is really exciting about this work is the immediate interpersonal connections. How do we change the systems so that interpersonal connection becomes the rule rather than the exception?

I'll speak for myself: I feel stretched a lot but also grateful for other folks who are also making sure that the system-level piece is informed and inextricable from the day-to-day immediate relationship building that is happening, that it's not top-down.

MS: And I would just add that I don't know that artists are the best stewards always for

all that either. I do think artists are the right people to pose the question or to provoke the question or conversation. That idea of disruption—healthy disruption—that's the creative impulse. I guess a short way of saying it is that building the team is so important. How do we tell our funders that you can't just fund the art project? You need to fund reentry services; you need to fund credible messengers to be in the room; you need to fund the holistic approach to model the sort of the world we're fighting for.

KS: It's not a product because that turns it back into a commercialized framework.

SL: If you are validating but also shifting the ways in which they understand their own narratives, when that becomes the truth, then how you operate with the system—whether it's in workshops or training with officers, whether it's advocacy with legal experts, whether it's hiring a community activist or someone to deal with the therapeutic needs of our youth—all of that is determined by what it is that the youth need and desire. And that's also a way in which you remove yourself.

MS: There are very small things that we can all be doing in our work that create a space that the youth really are directing and leading and controlling because if incarceration is literally stripping every ounce of agency from somebody, how can we model the alternative, the opposite, because agency is kind of like a muscle that you have to learn to use? You have to learn to see why it's important and when it's better not to assert it. For example, in prison that actually can be a dangerous situation.

We want this to be the most free-flowing thing in the world, and actually what

may be most useful is learning to be radically creative within a system of limitations because that's the world, unfortunately.

KS: I really appreciate a word you've used a couple of times, and that's *stewardship*, the idea of how you steward the voices of young people. What both of you are talking about and modeling in your work is how to actually work in partnership—in meaningful partnership—with young people. How do you foster a sense of being able to create within certain boundaries and not have those boundaries feel like something they've got to fight against, not have them create another set of triggers? You want it to be like, OK now, this is just going to be a container. How do you work with the young people to understand that piece of it too?

I'm just noticing language, and I felt like both of you touched on that sense of partnership with young people in the creation process.

SL: Absolutely. And I think this is a good opportunity as an ending note to try to succinctly imagine where that stewardship could go. So in the idealistic sense, where would we like our practices to go? Not as a culmination, necessarily.

MS: I really liked something you mentioned earlier about how the work provides or creates an invitation. One thing that's in our thinking around the national tour and is in the DNA of our project is that so many white-led nonprofits, organizers, advocates, and allies that I have connected with oftentimes feel like they don't know how to engage these issues. They don't see a role or space. It's too murky; it's too dangerous—in their

heads. And I think one of the things that truly collaborative projects can do is create entry points for so many people to be part of this and to truly support the young folks. And so in our work that means reaching out to radio stations and community print shops and all kinds of spaces to help amplify the young folks' vision and ideas and work. But it's also in that process creating touch points for folks to understand and engage with the issues, to see folks as complex human beings with the same needs that all of us have and amazing possibilities.

So I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm excited to continually open up that invitation and create more space where folks can be part of this process. This process can create an invitation, while so many parts of our society try to create separation, segregation, division.

SL: I always try to return to the original impetus of the work in believing that those closest to any issue should have a role in reshaping how we deal with that issue. On my own I have much more radical personal politics, but in this work I don't attempt to think of the end goal as a reinvention of this system. I simply think about the ways in which we might intervene and have a role in reimagining the possibilities of the system.

Shaun Leonardo is a Brooklyn-based artist and current Smack Mellon artist-in-residence. His multidisciplinary work negotiates societal expectations of manhood, namely definitions surrounding black and brown masculinities, along with its notions of achievement, collective identity, and experience of failure. His performance practice is participatory in nature and invested in a process of embodiment,promoting the political potential of attention and discomfort as a means to disrupt meaning and shift perspective. Leonardo is a recipient of support from Creative Capital and Guggenheim Social

Practice. His work has been presented in galleries and institutions nationally and internationally and recently featured at the Guggenheim Museum, the High Line, Recess, and VOLTA NY.

Kaile Shilling is the Founding Executive Director - Emeritus of the Arts for Healing and Justice Network (formerly the Arts for Incarcerated Youth Network (AIYN)), an interdisciplinary collaborative of member organizations that provides arts programming to youth in detention facilities in order to build resiliency and wellness, eliminate recidivism, and transform the juvenile justice system. In her role with AIYN she co-founded CREATE JUSTICE, a national gathering focusing on the intersection of arts and youth justice reform.

Mark Strandquist has spent years using art as a vehicle for connecting diverse communities to help amplify, celebrate, and power social justice movements. The media campaigns and immersive exhibitions he directs have helped advocates close prisons, pass laws, train an entire police force (Richmond, VA), and connect the dreams and demands of communities impacted by the criminal justice system with tens of thousands of people. He currently directs the Performing Statistics project in Richmond, VA, and, through fellowships from A Blade of Grass and Open Societies, co-directs the People's Paper Co-op and Reentry Think Tank with his partner Courtney Bowles.