

Originally published by *Cincinnati Beacon* (December 16, 2009).

## **A Call to Artists**

A Working Paper

December 8, 2009

Kelly Jo Asbury  
Chatfield College  
[kellyjo@zoomtown.com](mailto:kellyjo@zoomtown.com)

As an artist and educator I feel no greater responsibility than that of constant inquiry, whatever the topic. The query must be initiated in order to obtain deeper understanding within any context and it must be unapologetically intensive and extensive. Facts must be separated from opinions. I was involved with a public art project this summer, which inadvertently provided me with the opportunity to explore the “art of language”.

Words have always fascinated me, what they mean, how they are used to wield a great deal of power. My recent civic experience underscored the even greater power of the contextual use of words. Who is speaking carries a great deal of the inferred meaning of a word. The term I wish to stress as the anchor of my entire analysis is the word, Mythology. Allow me to provide the Webster’s definition to the term: “4. A popular belief or assumption that has grown up around someone or something.” What follows reveals my experience of how this word is utilized to simultaneously define and dismiss a population; a word I will in turn utilize myself to define the cultural “myths” shared by those subscribing to the aforementioned ideologies.

“The Art Man Cometh” is the title of a magazine interview with Jim Tarbell from 2003 by *ArtSpike*’s Arie Vandenberg. This title, of course, is taken from the Eugene O’Neill play from the late thirties entitled “The Ice Man Cometh,” which just happens to be one of my most cherished works of theatre. Strangely enough, my reasons for reveling in the complexities of the play’s relentless inquisition into truth as opposed to rationalization and justification are in direct contrast to the play’s borrowed reference in this piece of journalism. As a matter of fact I have found a great deal of perplexing and contradictory information over the course of this past summer spurred by a recent civic experience. During my research of local political figure Jim Tarbell, I stumbled across this magazine article. I shall share my reasons for this research momentarily, but what leapt from the article was this passage:

AS: What in your opinion, what can we do? [The question posed is in reference to the Over-the-Rhine community.] We want *ArtSpike* to be an open forum for artists, an open forum for anyone to discuss, display and read about the arts. What can we, or any arts-minded individual or organization, do to work with your committee to help move forward this agenda of arts in Cincinnati?

JT: I think just providing an open forum and running more information in and of itself is a great contribution. Artists and people involved in arts-related activity do have a role to play right now because of current needs and, to some extent, because of the mythology about gentrification and displacement....

The “mythology of gentrification and displacement”? Wow, really? How comforting it is to know that it’s all simply a myth, I guess somebody should let the community know all is well, huh? That is a shocking statement in and of itself for anyone to make let alone a political figure. Perhaps the irony of such delusional rhetoric is meant to serve as the antithesis to the genius of Eugene’s work... at least that’s what I’m telling myself anyway. (Coincidentally perpetuating a key conflict of the play...denial) O’Neill’s play is the quintessential act of fearless inquiry, unmasking our everyday rationalizations and justifications in order to reveal our true selves. To borrow the title of this work of theatre and fill it with the denouncement of truth through the support of mythological dismissal is absurd. No, I do not see a key character ripping off the veil of justification here so much as arranging flowers\* [more on this later] around it and asking for a longer train. I am outraged and saddened by this outlook, a view that has been and still is receiving buy-in from many different sectors of society here in Cincinnati and in urban environments all over the world. How can a view, which promises to serve the interests of artists, be supported by artists at the cost of disregarding the realities of an entire population as myth? Aren’t we supposed to be the sentries speaking for the marginalized? Aren’t we supposed to challenge the status quo and reveal truth no matter how unpleasant in order to bring about change, meaningful and beneficial change to all, not just some?

I am an artist. I have worked this past year in the community of Over the Rhine as an educator. I have learned more about this community through the eyes of those who actually reside here, an inside-out perspective, as opposed to rhetoric provided by media sources which provide an outside-in perspective. My social education began a new chapter in the last week of June when I began work as a teaching artist on the Central and Vine mural for the ArtWorks Summer Program. The weeks following the start of the project, my resignation and subsequent period of inquiry has proven to be of an enormous learning curve for me. I am troubled by my observations.

Mr. Tarbell was one of four people on the table at the beginning of the project on June 29<sup>th</sup>. I knew of his name but little else. I simply thought it odd for a living political figure to be in the mix, but it was still early and my socio/politico learning curve was just beginning. The project began with providing the very talented group of teenage working artists, traditional, academic figurative drawing sessions. We covered a variety of techniques due to the objective of the mural, which was the first of its kind for ArtWorks, a solitary figure, painted photo-realistically on the highly visible corner of Central and Vine. This figure was to be of a Cincinnati of “tremendous” significance. We took artist/students to the public library on Vine to extract a bit of research from the list of four candidates. Those names included Ezzard Charles, Mr. Spoons, Peanut Jim (Shelton), and Jim Tarbell. However, the real research for me did not come from the library, it came from sources a bit more tangible and direct.

Little effort was necessary to initiate what I consider to be the first role of an artist, questioning. It began with spending my lunches on the mural project, sitting on a sidewalk across from a storefront which reads “Lofts Ranging From the 90’s to the 300’s.” This is the southwest corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and Vine, this pathway in and of itself began to resonate on a deeper level to me of a troubling social re-order. What is this development? How can this be poised against the impoverished many for the privileged few. A separate message is inferred in the signage, there is no range of low to high income in such development, there is no inclusion of the already existing and struggling residents walking the streets. When I didn’t pack my lunch, many times I would grab something at the pizza parlor a few blocks up called Venice on Vine. I became acquainted with an establishment that represents the kind of ventures I find empowering, providing a business in the community by empowering the residents in the community. The organization PIP[Power Inspires Progress], a non-profit organization which offers paid on-the-job training to

inner city residents, along with some very dedicated professors and students from Miami University (Ohio) and the University of Cincinnati put together an establishment which employs members of the community with meaningful work who might otherwise not have a chance to do so due to a variety of circumstances. Digging deeper, I have learned about The Center for Community Engagement established by Miami University with key leadership from Professor Thomas A. Dutton. What these people bring to the table are two things; a love for people and a love for architecture. I would like to stress the order of that line-up. This is an initiative involving students from Miami with on-site civic engagement opportunities in order to understand the dynamics and to apply what they are learning in design and architecture through re-vamping abandoned buildings into low to mid level cost housing. They are providing a service to both the current residents of OTR and to the buildings which hold so much beauty. What the students receive is an invaluable social and inter-cultural education, an education which will continue to inform their civic stewardship as they pursue their careers in the urban environment. This certainly exemplifies what I call a symbiotic relationship, cyclical in nature, one that honors the beauty of people over the lure of profit.

It only takes the slightest bit of observational skills to witness what's going on in this community. Why does a storefront across from the condo complex post a banner which reads "We Shall Not Be Moved?" The streets speak openly of the effects of development that is exclusive, aggressive, and indignant. Certainly the rationalization runs deep which is why and how the powerful have pursued personal interests and ambitions throughout the course of history. The psychological rationale must be set in order to be righteous in the proceedings and to be absolved of any and all guilt in the wake of consequence. The language is exclusive and marks clearly the division of the haves coming in to push away the have-nots. The new does not include the old and I felt it distinctly as I paid attention to what I was observing from one block to the next.

'Cultural Imperialism' is what political theorist Iris Young refers to as that which, "involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm. ...[t]he culturally dominated undergo a paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible"(Young, 59) The cultural mythology of OTR resides in the criminalization of the poor and the homeless. The disdain for their presence is painfully apparent. To rationalize these emotions and turn those frustrations back onto the people rendered "unsavory," places blame solely on their shoulders for their conditions, consequently absolving the "privileged" from any responsibility and/or guilt on the issue. Hence an entire population becomes invisible by the desire to erase their presence as worthwhile. They have become by default, dismissed *by* "mythology." Their reality most certainly is not "mythological."

These observations were happening in the midst of the selection process for the exciting four-story mural. A process unfortunately not indicative of the acquisition of multiple viewpoints, providing no platform for all voices, thereby no pause to listen and consider all viewpoints. The one group meeting I was a party to, which was the much anticipated presentation of our working artists and their efforts, contained only six people outside of our project team and the staff of ArtWorks. These six represented local businesses or development firms, perhaps one or two actually live in the area. Uh, six middle-class Caucasians are not representative of the community at large. The demographics are not served, certainly those perspectives will not be heard or understood. Consequently a "community-based concept" evolved while side-stepping the community.

This did not meet my idea of a "group" meeting. The decision was made at this meeting by a few to go with Jim Tarbell. This troubling turn of events launched my investigative inquiry. Exactly

what does he represent politically and what of my observations of Vine Street up until that point, would there be correlations between the two?

My research started with asking students from a mixed media class I was teaching at Chatfield College, in which the majority of these students refer to OTR as their home, about the phrase “We Shall Not Be Moved” which resides on a storefront near 13<sup>th</sup> and Vine. They provided an initial education into the politics at play in the neighborhood ranging from aggressive building buy-outs, displacement, and multiple evictions. I was informed of many disheartening references to Mr. Tarbell and the “new” development. When I asked my students what names they would provide for the theme of the mural, they shared the following based on humanitarian contributions: Sister Francis of the Sarah Center; social activist buddy gray and Civil Rights activist Rev. McCracken. With these names I dove deeper into my research, talking to employees of local businesses along Vine, and developing a working dialogue with the community itself in order to better understand its residents from their perspective.

I noticed on my trips through Liberty street to teach and now more clearly in sporadic bursts on Vine, window boxes adorning various structures with fake flowers\*, undoubtedly to avoid the general maintenance and upkeep of real ones. These superficial applications against their contextual backdrops resonated words for me I remembered studying through an interdisciplinary course I instructed at NKU in which a text selected by the Book Connections program set the stage for first-year students and collaborative inquiry. The text entitled *Honky* by Dalton Conley is an autobiography of a social scientist who discovered his very childhood was a massive social experiment growing up in the projects of New York City during the 70s. Naturally the “flower box” movement there preceded Cincinnati by about 30 years. After more research I learned that the movement in Cincinnati was spearheaded by Jim Tarbell. Dalton Conley’s assessment of the New York City movement is as follows, “The flower box movement had embodied the notion that poverty was primarily an aesthetic problem. If we could just spruce things up a bit, we’d all have more hope; we might even become middle class” (Conley, 21). Suddenly these words resonate on a scale with far more fervor and understanding than the walls of academia could provide. Those initial discussions and classroom debates take on a far more powerful education now. I am a witness, first-hand and up close, to the exact replication of events history always promises to repeat, with only minor changes in geography.

Another text which resonates more powerfully to me now is *Nickel and Dimed* by Barbara Ehrenreich. The words of Ms. Ehrenreich are galvanizing in their assessment of cultural myths.

Just bear in mind, when I stumble, that is in fact the best case scenario: a person with every advantage that ethnicity and education, health and motivation can confer attempting...to survive in the economy’s lower depths...the real question is not how well I did at work but how well I did at life in general which includes eating and having a place to stay. The fact that these are two separate questions needs to be underscored right away. In the rhetorical buildup to welfare reform, it was uniformly assumed that a job was the ticket out of poverty and that the only thing holding back welfare recipients was their reluctance to get out and get one. I got one and sometimes more than one, but my track record in the survival department is far less admirable than my performance as a job holder. ...housing in almost every case, is the principal source of disruption in their[low wage coworker’s] lives...When the rich and the poor compete for housing on the open market, the poor don’t stand a chance. (Ehrenreich, 196-199)

Ms. Ehrenreich as a professional writer and journalist, placed herself within the context of low-wage America with controlled variables to her social experiment. She far from faced absolute poverty and the loss of any medical attention. She struggled through many circumstances and found that barely surviving was the only measure of success. Had she faced a severe illness or injury, for her the test would have been over, for the truly poor it would have meant loss of home and job. Mobility was not a word that followed the term Upward. Larger forces are at play which govern the rules of “class” mobility.

Unfortunately the project at Central and Vine endorses a figure I diametrically oppose with reference to his visions for the development in Over-the-Rhine. With my experiences personally teaching in Over-the-Rhine, learning more about grass roots organizations in the community and the politics at play I find conflict with the selection process that adorned Jim Tarbell. I understand the want to produce “polarizing” and “controversial” imagery and there is much material to explore in the community. My conflict stems with where I place my stamp of approval in that conflict. This why I could not participate in the completion of this mural.

There is a certain amount of ego which goes into knowing you will be a part of a four story mural, I made the decision that ego, arrogance, and ambition were already running amuck in this community by invasive “exclusionary” forces. I did not and do not wish to be a party to more of the same. Residents must view a figure who refers to their realities as myth, the realities of gentrification. I see “cultural imperialism” taking place on a large scale through the lens of class and through the support of various institutions and sectors of society. Much of the new development is not inclusive or equitable to the already existing residents within the community of Over-the-Rhine. “It is certainly true that global capitalism is typically much more concerned with expanding the domain of market relations than with, say, establishing democracy, . . . Mere globalization of markets, on its own, can be a very inadequate approach to world prosperity” (Sen, 9). I see “cultural imperialism” in full swing operating through what Henry Giroux refers to as the “politics of disposability” (Giroux).

Any decision-making group, whether it be political, educational, social etc., will only be as successful as its methodologies and processes. If those processes are murky that group will fail and compromise the interests of the marginalized or in this case the ignored. It saddens me greatly that this fiasco takes place through an arts entity. An entity which builds its foundation on serving the very communities gentrification threatens most. “Diverse” neighborhoods house mural selection sites, how then can this very positive principle of empowerment be undermined by the same organization? “To be sure, ‘diversity’ is an important aspect of the appeal of OTR to many new residents. But diversity must be an open-ended pluralism and not defined solely by the needs of new or potential residents. Such a view rarely sees the poor as they want to be seen. Usually positioned as props in the urban experience, the poor are rarely seen as full human beings, as gifts with their own contributions to make to the urban drama. Any development strategy that does not put the question of fairness to existing residents at its center is deeply flawed.” (Diskin and Dutton, 5)

How can a community be served by an image referring to their realities as myth? How can the understanding of a community be so empathetically void by so many sectors of society including those tied to the arts? Why would I be told of how “controversial” the mural is supposed to be if those compromises weren’t considered and ultimately endorsed by ArtWorks? Why would I be asked to approach the project as a designer and simply complete the task if the waters here weren’t incredibly murky? Please allow me to suggest speaking with a resident/employee of OTR as a top priority to the query process. The order and nature of the questioning process itself is just as vulnerable to subjective motivations as deciding what to have for lunch. I would place getting

to know residents a bit higher than getting to know the bankers. I wish to serve a marriage of arts-related activities working with and for the community. I do not wish to be an empty vessel, providing a substitution culture for the original. I do not subscribe to criminalizing the poor and the homeless. I do not view gentrification as myth.

## References

Conley, Dalton. *Honky*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

Diskin, Jonathan and Dutton, Thomas. "Gentrification—It Ain't What You Think," ([www.fna.muohio/cce/engagements.html](http://www.fna.muohio/cce/engagements.html)) 2006.

Ehrenreich, Barbara. *Nickel and Dimed*. (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2001).

Giroux, Henry. *Against the New Authoritarianism*. (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2005).

O'Neill, Eugene. *The Iceman Cometh*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1946, 1999).

Sen, Amartya, "Interdependence and Global Justice," (New York: Paper presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations, October, 2004).

Vandenberg, Arie. "Jim Tarbell: The Arts Man Cometh," ([www.artspike.org/publish/public\\_html](http://www.artspike.org/publish/public_html)).

Young, Iris. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. (Princeton University Press, 1990).