
BOOK REVIEW

The Culture of Possibility: Art, Artists & the Future, by Arlene Goldbard

Reviewed by Stephani Etheridge Woodson, Arizona State University

The thoughtful work of cultural activist Arlene Goldbard has been foundational to many community cultural development artists and public scholars. Her latest text, *The Culture of Possibility: Art, Artists & the Future*, builds off her previous work with the ambitious goal to “reframe public interest in art and culture.” As she writes in her introduction: “the book incorporates arguments, stories, and perspectives I have evolved from years of writing and speaking on the subject, as well as considerable new material.” Goldbard’s bold experimentation with structure continues to be one of her assets as a writer and public intellectual. *The Culture of Possibility* contains three distinct sections—as well as a companion work of fiction, *The Wave*—each framing her argument and information in particular ways. The first section of the book, helpfully called “Read this First,” serves as a brief introduction to the text while establishing Goldbard’s terms and lenses. The second and longest section, “Hidden in Plain Sight: Twenty-Eight Reasons to Pursue the Public Interest in Art,” provides exactly that in short, digestible and interrelated chunks. Her last section, “The World is Upside Down” presents much of the same information while grounding her argument in a more traditional essay format. The text as a whole pulls from a broad range of Western philosophy and cultural traditions weaving storytelling with economic analysis, spiritual traditions, poetry and neuroscience.

Goldbard’s scope is impressive as is her analysis of why current arguments on cultural inclusion and funding justifications undermine the cultural field, art and artists. She states:

I fear for our future if we continue to muster only weak arguments and special pleading for art’s public purpose, minimizing the real value of culture in the service of democracy and freedom.

In effect, *The Culture of Possibility* posits alternative frameworks for why culture and the arts matter. Goldbard asks three questions grounding her exploration of alternative structures:

Who are we as a people?
What do we stand for?
How do we want to be remembered?

Goldbard’s discussion of how frames control not only public discourse but also private possibilities is a strength of the text. Anyone concerned with articulating the “value” of cultural space and public practice of the arts should read and ponder her analysis. Additionally, I believe almost anyone could find one or two of the twenty-eight alternative frames she offers useful or even game changing. As a theatre for youth specialist and the director of undergraduate studies in a school of film, dance and theatre, I found her number fifteen, “Six Skills Intrinsic to Art Can Actuate Social Change” particularly intriguing. Using the example of the Arab Spring, Goldbard suggests six abilities necessary to the young activists at the center of the revolutions in North Africa: Social Imagination, Empathy, the Ability to Improvise, Cultural Citizenship, Connectivity, and Creativity. For example she writes on cultural citizenship:

[...] to change an old order, people need awareness of cultural citizenship and the aspiration to inhabit it fully. This is not citizenship in the narrow legal sense of papers and voting rights, but about the inner sense of belonging that allows us to feel that we are welcome in our society and community, that our contributions count, that our heritage and our expressions are respected. In many societies, even people who possess the right to vote feel keenly the extent to which they are denied the fullness of cultural citizenship on account of race, religion, ethnicity, economic status, or other characteristics seen as social deficits. The right to cultural citizenship is core to virtually all liberation movements; without it, what are you fighting for?

As an educator, thinking strategically about these six skills can reframe my justification narratives or how I assess learning. If you have been following the fascinating blog conversations on culture, art, diversity and whiteness (like this [one](#) by Roberto Bedoya of the Pima Arts Council), you may be struck by how useful Goldbard's point could be in this context, too. In most of the material I have read—all strikingly honest—the underlying values have been oriented toward diversifying creativity, fairness or demographic transformation. What if we were to talk about cultural citizenship as liberation? How would that change our rhetoric?

My one objection with the text rests on the binary metaphors used to organize the arguments. “Hidden in Plain Sight” compares and contrasts what Goldbard calls “the two main paradigms:”

One is Datastan, a world in which everything that counts can be counted; the other, The Republic of Stories, a world in which everything carries a story and all stories matter. In the first realm, art and culture are trivial—entertaining, perhaps, but in the end, nice but unnecessary. In the realm that's hard to see if you are committed to Datastan's perspective, culture is the secret of survival, the connective tissue of the body politic, the matrix in which we cultivate identity, work out shared meanings, and fashion any hope of a *modus vivendi*, of a livable future.

“The World is Upside Down” uses “Corporation Nation, where virtues like social responsibility, altruism, and compassion most often appear as advertising ploys, cynical jokes or acts of contrition.” Ultimately, I believe these binaries limit Goldbard's thesis rather than clarify it. After all, science and data are still stories, and for-profit does not necessarily equate with a lack of social consciousness—for example, the majority of our film students seek employment in commercial settings but still focus on social responsibility. Not to mention my discomfort with the term, “Datastan” in general.

Ultimately, Goldbard points out, “Human beings exist simultaneously in physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realms.” Her text connects each of those aspects with cultural expression and the arts in grounded ways offering multiple paths into her discussion. Whether or not Goldbard succeeds in her evangelical desire to change “the meaning of all that we see and do” remains to be seen. Still, her call to “cultivate individual awareness, spread

ideas, create excitement and stimulate private-sector initiatives that can gather energy and bubble up into the public sector” excites me.