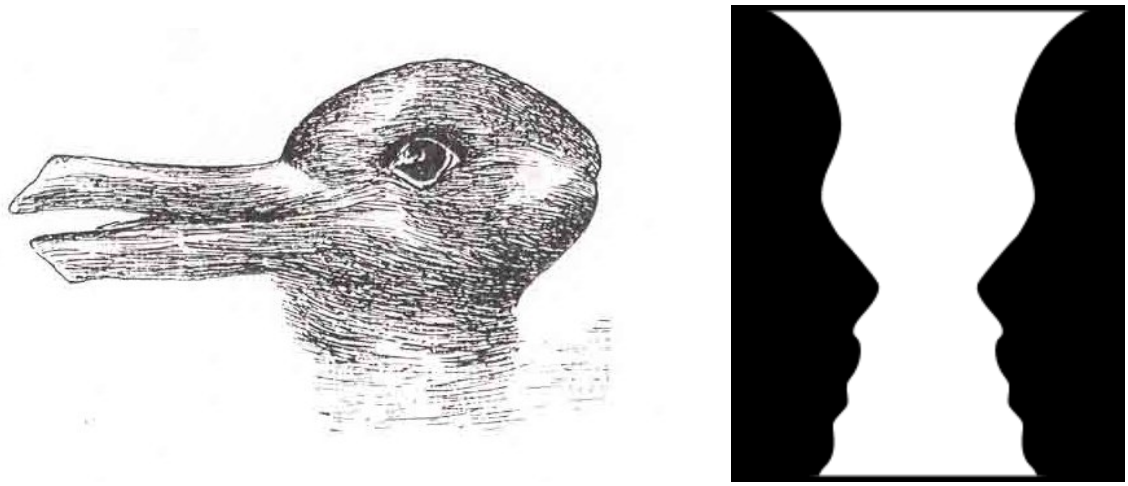
A R L E N E G O L D B A R D
W W W . A R L E N E G O L D B A R D . C O M
C E L L : 4 1 5 - 6 9 0 - 9 9 9 2 A R L E N E @ A R L E N E G O L D B A R D . C O M

This is the text of a talk I gave in St. Louis on 26 March 2010 as part of "At the Crossroads: A Community Arts & Development Convening," sponsored by The Community Arts Training Institute (CAT) and the Regional Arts Commission (RAC).

Why Culture Is The Secret of Survival (and Why We Keep Missing The Point)

By Arlene Goldbard

I love optical illusions, especially the kind that toggle back and forth between two different pictures.



Gaze at the image on the left. What do you see? Some will see the profile of a duck, facing left, its bill slightly open. Do you also see the rabbit? Think of the duck's bill as the rabbit's ears, and it will come into focus, a rabbit in profile, facing right. Gazing at the figure on the right, you will be able to switch between a white vase centered on a black ground and two human profiles in silhouette against a white ground.

You've probably heard the term "paradigm shift"—so often, in fact, that its meaning gets watered down into a simple change of perspective. But when historian of science Thomas Kuhn proposed this term for a change of scientific consensus, its meaning was more precise. A paradigm shift takes place when an older system of understanding can no longer hold newly emerging knowledge. If you are certain the earth is flat, and evidence accumulates that ships sailing over the farthest horizon return, rather than plunging into nothingness, your old model of planetary reality shatters, making way for a new one.

These optical illusions illustrate one important aspect of the concept: how the same information can have two completely different meanings, depending on your framework of understanding.

Some people have to stare at the duck or the rabbit a long time before the other animal flips into view, but once they see it, they always see it. There's a delight in that a-ha! moment, the pure pleasure of epiphany. I'm here today not to convince you of the centrality of art and culture to our survival and sustainability as a society, but to show you how that assertion is already proven. The problem is that not everyone can see it—yet.

Ready? All I ask is that you listen for half an hour. If you have questions or comments, just jot them down and we'll have plenty of time at the end.

You can also think of paradigms as being made up of frames that show us what information to focus on, like a picture frame. In cognitive linguistics, frames are embedded concepts—stories and images, metaphors and parables—that shape our perception and thereby our thinking. In politics, the easiest bits of framing to spot are all about language. Right-wing politicians were able to contaminate the idea of a tax on inherited wealth by renaming it the "death tax." New Yorkers who opposed an Arabic-language public school called themselves the "Stop The Madrassa Coalition." The Texas Board of Education voted this month to replace the word "capitalism" in textbooks with "free-enterprise system." But it's not all words. Tea Partiers have used costumes, props and other imagery identified with the American Revolution to associate their movement with freedom from tyranny. Successful reframing resonates with deeply held values and stories: the Tea Partiers plugged into a readymade storehouse of Founding Fathers images that gave them a head-start in going viral.

For decades now, the right has been depicting our public sector as an enemy of freedom and a failing business: an inept Big Brother. In this frame, government wastes money, rewards corruption, exploits taxpayers, stifles enterprise, forces bad products down our throats. And the private sector is government's opposite: accountable, forward-thinking, efficient, and responsive. When resonant frames are hammered home, they tend to stick, because they are grounded in feelings, images and metaphors that aren't dislodged by mere information. Indeed, even abundant evidence of corporate malfeasance and incompetence hasn't defeated the anti-government, pro-corporate frame.

This is a transitional moment between paradigms of social value and meaning. In the old paradigm, "hard" data—weights, measurements, any form of quantification—predominate almost to the exclusion of other forms of judgment, with the absurd result that many of the things human beings care about most are not part of our controlling social equations because they can't be quantified. Thus we are willing to sacrifice children's well-rounded education, the kind that teaches them to be resilient, improvisational, curious and creative, for one that reduces education to numeric test scores. When things don't fit the system—messy things, like emotions, or the life of the senses, or spirituality—we just ignore them, treat them like background noise, or even pretend they don't exist.

Within the old paradigm's definition of public interest, art is a very weak contender. Art is merely entertainment, embellishment, fancy stuff for fancy people. Nice if you go in for that sort of thing, but non-essential. Social goods like free expression, the personal and collective need for beauty and meaning, and the value of cultivating our intrinsic human desire to create, have had almost no role in public discourse. Instead, most "mainstream" arts advocates have remained committed

to a desperation strategy focused on justifying cultural expenditure through weak economic arguments and secondary benefits. Like chameleons who defend themselves by blending in, they hope to convince opponents that art is just good business, a clever strategy for raising test scores and tax revenues.

Listening to Mozart in the womb gives babies a sort of subliminal head-start. Kids who play in the school orchestra are less likely to drop out. A lot of this research is weak, because there are too many factors to separate cause from effect. The children of educated parents are both less likely to drop out and more likely to join the orchestra. Mainstream advocacy groups have spent vast sums trumpeting the "economic multiplier effect," in which every dollar spent on theater tickets generates more dollars on parking and restaurants, multiplying jobs and taxes. This is true, as far as it goes. But the arts have no special claim: if you buy tickets to a dog show or nude lady mud wrestling, the result is the same.

At every arts advocacy workshop, we're told we'll succeed by speaking the language of legislators and corporations. Really? How's that working out? In constant dollars, the 1980 and 2009 NEA budgets were each $155 million. But the FY 2009 budget should have been more than $400 million just to *equal* the spending power of 1980. Faith is invested in discredited orthodoxies because people can't see anything else to believe in. They just cling to a failed strategy. A radical shift in thinking is needed. The a-ha moment has arrived, and now we need to help people perceive it.

One reason you can stare at the duck a long time before the rabbit comes into focus is that your perceptual apparatus won't admit another view, you're committed to seeing things a certain way. Consider how politicians pit spending on culture against things like school lunches or healthcare for the indigent. Accepting this frame for the debate—should our taxes fund frills or survival?—has made arts advocates obsessed with proving that arts funding is a productive public investment, rather than a net loss. But look at the numbers. It can't really be about money, because the cost savings from cutting the arts is negligible, and compared to profligate spending in other areas, laughable. The total allocation for the state arts agency where I live, the California Arts Council, represented less than one-one thousandth of one percent of the state budget, a penny out of every $100,000. It was less than one one-hundredth of one percent of state expenditure on prisons and associated costs alone.

Going along with the pretense that the debate over arts support is actually about budget cuts equals agreeing to lose the argument. It colludes with those who don't want to face the much deeper and more troubling truth of what is at stake. When politicians say we can't afford arts funding, they are trying to purchase public-opinion insurance as insulation against opposition to cuts they will make in public services with larger or more powerful or less compliant constituencies. In symbolic speech, they are saying, *Don't be mad at us. We lopped the head off all the really unnecessary things like the arts before even trimming the fat from medical care or education.*

This is a figure-and-ground problem, like the image that toggles between the silhouette of a vase and two profiles. In one view, art must be cut to save money for serious things. But the hidden image is evident as soon as you look at the numbers. It's not about school lunches: our national priority is more punishment than nourishment. The U.S. has over seven million people in prison, on parole or probation, by far the highest number and highest incarceration rate on the planet,

with the total of state spending alone equaling around $52 billion.[1] The National Priorities Project[2] calculates that the U.S. has spent more than $970 billion on wars since 2001. That's roughly equal to two annual NEA budgets a day, seven days a week.

When you bring the other image into focus, the real questions emerge: Who are we as a people? What do we want to be known for: our stupendous ability to punish, or our vast creativity? It will take a paradigm shift to surface that debate, and we can help bring it about.

One thing we can do is marshal evidence in forms the old paradigm can understand. In transition times, when the old container no longer holds, but a new consensus has not yet emerged, ideas contend. Many people will be unable to perceive evidence that doesn't fit the old frame. That's why it's great that scientists have recently turned their attention to assessing artistic creativity, and that so many of them have "discovered" value that had previously escaped their notice. To those whose knowledge is grounded in direct experience, such results may be akin to "discovering" that mother's milk is good for babies. But remember, it was common for experts to recommend baby formula as superior until what was self-evident to Mother Nature had been validated empirically.

I'll mention just a few recent results.

In the February issue of *Nature Reviews Genetics*[3], evolutionary biologists wrote that "gene-culture co-evolution could be the dominant mode of human evolution." Their models show that cultural processes can have a profound effect on human evolution. In evolutionary biology, they talk about the concept of "niche construction" as a way to ameliorate the effect of physical forces on natural selection. Birds do it by building nests. The authors ask us to

> [I]magine an ancestral population that has been exposed to changes in temperatures. In the absence of niche construction, this would engender bouts of selection for genes favoured in hot or cold climates. However, if humans can put on or take off clothes, build fires, find caves and develop means of cooling, they effectively counteract these changed selection pressures. The temperature changes actually experienced by the population are dampened relative to the external environment and as a consequence selection is weak.

This is cultural in the anthropological sense in which clothing and shelter are understood as aspects of human culture. But rituals and customs have had the same impact: for instance, incest taboos have accelerated genetic predispositions not to mate with the people who raised us. And how are taboos and other social values transmitted in human community? Through legend, parable, ceremony, dance, and ritual—which is to say, through the methods of art.

---

[1] Pew Center on the States, *One in 31: The Long Reach of American Corrections* (Washington, DC: The Pew Charitable Trusts, March 2009), 11.
[2] http://www.costofwar.com/
[3] Kevin N. Laland1, John Odling-Smee, and Sean Myles, "How culture shaped the human genome: bringing genetics and the human sciences together," *Nature Reviews Genetics* 11, 137-148 (February 2010); http://www.nature.com/nrg/journal/v11/n2/abs/nrg2734.html

Such findings support philosopher Denis Dutton's argument that human artistic creativity was central to our development during the Pleistocene era. It turns out that these big brains that create pleasure, support the whole range of emotions, enable feats of imagination, use storytelling to solve problems, and allow us to create beauty in so many forms—our big brains are also a favored trait for sexual selection. When seeking mates, our earliest ancestors valued innovation, dexterity, grace, and other forms of skillfulness associated with art. This is also good news for countless starving artists looking for love in a time that otherwise values earning capacity. Don't give up: evolution is on our side!

Scientists are also proving that, for our brains to serve the future, we must develop our creative imagination and empathic capacities through arts participation. Antonio and Hanna Damasio of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California are leading brain scientists who have also become advocates for arts education. Rapid and intense changes in the way we spend our time, the way we communicate and process information, have created "a growing disconnect between cognitive processing and emotional processing…," they write. "It has been classically claimed that cognition and emotion are two entirely different processes for the human mind and for the human brain. And that, somehow, a rational mind would be one in which cognitive skills developed to a maximum and emotional processing would be suppressed to a maximum because somehow, emotion would not be a good counselor of cognitive creativity. We have to tell you that not only do we not agree with this claim but that everything that has occurred over the past ten years of cognitive neuroscience reveals that this traditional split is entirely unjustified."

"[A] curriculum which features arts and humanities education is one way of conducting the moral exercises on which citizenship is grounded… Arts and humanities education can be a playground for the development of good citizens."[4]

At the recent American Association for the Advancement of Science Conference, Harvard neuroscientist Dr. Gottfried Schlaug explained that brain-damaged individuals can regain the power of speech through singing.[5] "These interventions are very useful to stroke victims," he said. "Music is a good medium to get parts of the brain responding that are not responding."

Dr. Schlaug is Director of the Music and Neuroimaging Laboratory, originator of many studies on making music and brain function. One showed increases in important aspects of brain volume and in the connection between left and right hemispheres in musicians.[6] In another, he found that in children taking music lessons who practiced at least two and one-half hours a week, a region of the corpus callosum that connects two sides of the brain grew about 25% relative to the overall brain size, and that growth directly predicted their improvement on a test of planning and coordinating movement. In other words, investing serious time in making music measurably improved other capacities.

Daniel Casasanto and Katinka Dijkstra, two psychologists from the Netherlands, recently reported a definitive link between physical movements, emotion, and memory, with upward movements

---

[4] From Dr. Antonio Damasio's speech at the World Conference on Arts Education, sponsored by UNESCO in 2006, is available at http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=2916.

[5] Richard Alleyne, "Encouraging severe stroke victims to sing can help them regain the ability to talk, new research claims," 21 February, 2010. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/healthnews/7285154/AAAS-Singing-helps-stroke-victims-relearn-language.html

[6] Greg Miller, "Music Builds Bridges in the Brain, *Science Now*, April 16, 2008, http://news.sciencemag.org/sciencenow/2008/04/16-01.html

correlating more strongly to positive memories and emotions, and downward movements with negative feeling.[7] Here's the penultimate sentence of a report on the research: "Perhaps great choreographers intuitively realize certain movements have specific emotional meanings."

What's happening here is that the guardians of measurement and value dominant within the old paradigm are finally getting around to assessing the role of art-making within individual and social development, and each finding adds to its importance. This research is needed because we are in the last days of a framework that denies the evidence of our own senses unless it is validated by quantifiable criteria. Even things that have endured since time immemorial have seemed to lack good reasons for existing if value couldn't be measured in the lab. Quite a few beneficial practices and body-parts were lopped off on the advice of scientists who didn't consider that there might be immunological benefits to tonsils or the vermiform appendix, or that the intangible benefits of physical closeness between mother and child might be enormous, even if unquantifiable.

Today, the old paradigm's rigid assumptions are softening as a truth emerges, one we know in every cell of our bodies. Making art is the essence of being human. We do it in marble palaces and grass huts, every time we mark the unfolding of our lives. Even under the worst possible conditions, in SuperMax prisons and concentration camps, people save precious crumbs or scrape up mud to make sculptures. They scratch on prison walls with rocks or bits of charcoal. Herbert Zipper, the founding director of the National Guild of Community Schools of the Arts, led a clandestine orchestra in Dachau. Our ancestors gathered around campfires, huddling against the darkness to share stories of the hunt, the trek, the storm and their meanings. Today we sit in massive multiplexes, warming ourselves by the light of much busier and more complicated stories. But underneath, we are the same. Making stories, images, songs and structures is as essential to us as breathing.

Just like our ancestors, we assign value and make decisions based on what cognitive linguist George Lakoff calls "real reason," which incorporates our bodies, emotions and spirits as well as our intellects. People make decisions about the important things in life, including politics, through story, metaphor, physical sensation, and emotion, as well as logical calculation. The stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we are doing here shape our lives.

What stories need telling now? To survive the crisis in democracy, to achieve a humane and sustainable social order, we need the capacity to put ourselves in the other's place and make choices driven by more than crude self-interest; and the social imagination to envisage new solutions to stubborn social problems. We need stories that draw the connections between public choices and actual human lives, stories that cultivate awareness and compassion.

Empathy and social imagination cannot be learned through intellect alone. Through experience and fantasy, through film, theater, dance, music, literature and visual art, through sharing our stories of resourcefulness and resilience, through sharing our own creativity, human beings have

[7] Tom Jacobs, "To Feel Good, Reach for the Sky: New research finds upward physical movements inspire positive memories," Miller-McCune, http://www.miller-mccune.com/health/to-feel-good-reach-for-the-sky-8445/

always learned to know and care for each other, to strengthen our families and communities and to face down challenges.

Right now, we need the skills of imagination, improvisation and renewal that can be learned more fully and deeply through art than by any other means. And we—the people who have made art our life's work—need to be able to express, embody and convey these truths without hesitation or embarrassment. We need the courage to hold to these truths, even when the guardians of the old paradigm can't see them, or dismiss them as soft, or subject them to ridicule.

What else can we do to put ourselves on the side of this switch, where art and culture, long perceived as a backdrop to social value, will flip into visibility as something central and essential to the public interest?

We need to promote active questioning of the old paradigm, to give people the opportunity to see how it is not serving them. This means a moratorium on submitting to absurd arguments, such as pretending that cutting arts budgets has a significant impact on public deficits. When people can only see the vase, we need to point out the profiles. The illusion of cost-cutting has provided bulletproof cover for anyone who wants to earn budget-hero points by slashing the arts. Every one of them should be called upon to respond to actual budget priorities, to actual public expenditure on wars and prisons. If they want us to go down in history as the planet's most powerful and profligate punisher, instead of its most prodigious creator of beauty and meaning, let's make them own it.

We need to own what we know too. We need to stand up for the power of artistic creativity as we experience it in our own lives. I am certain that I am not the only person in this room who can say her life was saved by art. I am certain that I am not the only person in this room who has seen countless lives saved by art. We're not doing this for the great pay or the social prestige or the cushy working conditions, are we? Regardless of our individual stories, we started down the path of makers of beauty and meaning or supporters of that process through an awakening best characterized in spiritual terms, as an encounter with the ineffable, with something that can never be adequately expressed, but which ignites in our hearts the desire to keep trying.

Perhaps you were taken to a theater, a film, or a concert, and in that darkened space, your entire being was concentrated on receiving something, your body, feelings, mind and spirit came for the first time into absolute, coherent focus, and you wanted to return as soon and as often as possible. Perhaps you lifted your own voice in song and felt the world change around you. Perhaps you raised a pen or brush to make a mark, and felt time standing still, with you at its center, entirely awake and dissolved in the experience. All human beings are drawn to this integrated state. It is the way we feel in the full flow of creativity, when overcome by love, when gazing into the heart of a rose, when watching the sun rise over the ocean. It is one of the essential experiences of being human, and when we make art, we can have it again and again and again.

Arts advocates have been trying to pour the vast personal and social importance of this experience into containers—into language, slogans, arguments, strategies—far too small to hold it. Art's essence is its ability to engage us fully in body, emotions, mind and spirit, to create beauty

and meaning, to cultivate imaginative empathy, to disturb the peace, to enable grief in the face of loss and hope in the face of grief. Trying to explain or demonstrate this with numbers is like trying to describe a rainbow without mentioning color.

It is ineffective, discouraging and unworthy of who we really are to keep trying the same failed approach. The result has been almost unbearable frustration at being unable to put our point across. When you are told again and again that what you know to be true is just your imagination, you start to take that doubting voice into yourself, you hear it even when no one else is around. You lose the courage of your convictions. So another thing we can do is show up as ourselves, telling the truth of our own experience.

For many, many people, culture already occupies the foreground, but the news hasn't gotten out. Even many who identify as "arts people" are still staring at the rabbit, unable to bring the duck into focus. That's because "the arts" as a concept has been jammed into a frame that is all about entitlement and privilege. Henry Lee Higginson founded the Boston Symphony Orchestra by exhorting his fellow plutocrats to "Educate, and save ourselves and our families and our money from the mobs!" The stink of that has clung for 125 years. The snobbery contaminating much of the nonprofit arts sector has done more to alienate potential supporters than any other factor. Even public discussion about cultural policy has been constrained by it. Instead of raising essential cultural questions—digital democracy, cultural equity, the nature of education, the public interest in telecommunications, the role of artists in national recovery—the whole debate has been reduced to an on-off switch: NEA funding, yes or no? This doesn't serve us. We can let it go.

Instead, we can open our own and others' eyes to information that hasn't been given its true value within the old framework, but which is becoming increasingly visible as a new paradigm of social value and meaning emerges. At the supermarket, in school hallways, eating lunch on a park bench, we are surrounded by people whose senses and spirits have been pried open by art in remarkably powerful ways. Whether they happen in red-carpeted halls, on street corners, in community centers, in front of computers, or in church basements, we have got to recognize those experiences as integral and valid parts of culture, essential to the entire cultural ecology. The plain truth is that for many people, cultural practice—images, stories, music, dancing, taking part in rituals and celebrations—is the essential stuff of life and the principal container of meaning. I've heard more thoughtful and passionate conversations about globalization stimulated by the film *Avatar* and about racial stereotyping stimulated by the film *Precious* than by a year of news stories. Haven't you?

We can also recognize that in the emergent paradigm, it is essential to support artists working in public service. What we derive from audience experiences is important, but hands-on art-making in community is the most powerful and direct way for people to experience the public interest in culture. There are at least three ways to approach this. We can legitimate the work of artists as a vehicle for many forms of public service and public-interest work, so that every public-sector agency is authorized and encouraged to employ artists as an integral part of its mission. That can create thousands of jobs immediately, with artists working in existing education, community development, social work, environmental and health-related programs. We can create a purpose-built public service employment program like the WPA during the New Deal of the 1930s, one that supports the work of artists in healing our social fabric, building community, creating forums for exchange and understanding, surfacing buried history, beautifying communities, caring for the ill, educating children, and much more. And we can encourage organizations throughout the nonprofit sector to use creative expression to convey and embody their messages much more effectively than many conventional forms of organizing and communications.

More and more people think this is a good idea, but for every advocate, there's someone who says this: "I don't know anyone in Congress who would sponsor that legislation right now," or "Washington isn't going to spend money on artists anytime soon." I don't dispute these claims: we aren't going to snap our fingers and have a new WPA tomorrow. But I have been advocating for this long enough to see that if the people who rejected it as not immediately doable twenty years ago had kept pressing the idea, it could be a reality today. The same is true for the entire democratic interest in culture. The marginalization of this critical social concern has gone to absurd lengths, with intelligent, aware people pretending that arguing over a few million dollars in NEA funding exhausts the subject. The tyranny of the immediately doable has deformed both our social imagination and our willingness to persevere in the service of long-term change. The one certainty is that if we keep dropping the subject because the current odds are against us, it will *never* happen.

The case has already been made. Every day, in every corner of this country, nearly every life, nearly every waking hour, is saturated with music, stories, visual imagery, and conscious movement expressing the intrinsic nature and overwhelming resilience of human creativity. Culture is already the secret of survival. Our task is to help people see that our collective well-being depends on recognizing the public interest in supporting artistic creativity, that with our future riding on the stories that shape us, we had better make a serious investment in our capacity to create and share stories.

Some people are trying to wedge the demands of this moment into another too-small frame, as if all we need to do is "rebrand" the arts, to become better marketers and lobbyists. But that would waste this moment, when the breakdown of many of the old paradigm's verities has created an opening for new truths to emerge. If we embrace it, we can help to midwife a seismic shift in human history, in which the things that have been shunted off to the margins—beauty, meaning, reflection, creativity, facing loss and finding resilience—can be given their true value.

The great James Baldwin said that, "The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers." Here are my questions: What do we stand for? How do we want to be remembered? My definition of a life worth living is one marked by a congruence of inner and outer realities, in which actions are shaped by whatever truly matters most. In this moment of transition, no one can guarantee that we will get what we want. All we can do is discover what ignites our passion, offer up our best efforts in its service, and surrender to the processes that have produced so many astounding surprises in the course of human history. As every artist knows, the pleasure is in the doing, at least as much as the result.

You can stare at the rabbit a long time before you see the duck, but once it pops into view, you can never un-see it. More questions are accumulating than the old paradigm can contain. What will flip the switch? Maybe our refusal to settle for anything but this truth: culture is the secret of survival.

# # #