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# Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts

Monday, April 7, 2014

## Join in online!

We know many of you here are writers, journalists and bloggers and we welcome submissions to our website, [SalzburgGlobal.org](http://SalzburgGlobal.org)!

If you're interested in writing either an op-ed style article or a personal reflection blog post whilst you're here this week, please let Salzburg Global Editor, Louise Hallman know or email your submission directly to [lhallman@salzburgglobal.org](mailto:lhallman@salzburgglobal.org).

If you do intend to write for your own publication either whilst you're here or afterward the session, please make sure to observe the **Chatham House Rule** (information on which is in your Welcome Pack). If you're in any doubt, do not hesitate to contact Louise.

We'll be updating our website with summaries from the panels and interviews with our Fellows, all of which you can find on the session page: [www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/532](http://www.SalzburgGlobal.org/go/532)

You can also join in the conversation on Twitter with the hashtag [#artandpeace](https://twitter.com/artandpeace) and see all your fellow Fellows on Twitter via the list [www.twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-532](https://twitter.com/salzburgglobal/lists/SGS-532)

We're updating both our Facebook page [www.facebook.com/SalzburgGlobal](https://www.facebook.com/SalzburgGlobal) and our Flickr stream [www.flickr.com/SalzburgGlobal](https://www.flickr.com/SalzburgGlobal) with photos from the session during this week and also after the session. (If you require non-watermarked images for your own publication, please let Louise know.)



Fellows inspect the shrapnel-riddled walls of the Chinese Room in the traditional first night Schloss Tour



Peter Jenkinson and Shelagh Wright will facilitate the four-day session's discussions

## Peace-building and the Arts Make art, not war

Alex Jackson

**The Salzburg Global Seminar session, "Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts" opened on Sunday with over 60 participants coming from across the world to consider the role of cultural institutions in post-conflict reconciliation and forgiveness.**

Over the next four days, participants will reflect on inspirational examples of art that have helped create social change and peace, and will consider whether the lessons presented in these cases can be improved upon and put into practice in wider contexts. Often, we find that the element of empathy and honest humanity are key factors in introducing a space for dialogue and debate on wide ranging issues, to find mutual grounds and common understanding. Conflict resolution rebuilds societies, by focusing on overarching values that unite opposing social groups and humanize the enemy.

The aim of the session is to develop

and implement up to five "Building Peace Through Arts" pilot projects in critical conflict-ridden regions around the world over the next five years. It is hoped that these art forms will not only highlight methods by which aggression and hostility can give way to forgiveness and reconciliation, but will also be able to tackle root causes of divisions.

With the 100th anniversary of World War One this year, it is important to reflect on the intersection between art and conflict on a continent so renowned for its cultural contributions, yet ravaged by a century of war itself. Meeting in a neutral space that still resonates with the strife of war, Salzburg Global hopes the participants will be inspired by its locale to entertain ideas of peace-building on an international scale, with long-term, interdisciplinary projects.

Art stands as a constant reminder of the lessons of the past and the direction of the future. After all, as Picasso once said, "Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war."

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Professor James Thompson opens the Salzburg Global Seminar session on Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts

## Arts, peace-building and the time/space continuum “Not all art is positive”

Louise Hallman

**There are two key questions that face James Thompson, lead researcher of [InPlaceofWar.net](http://InPlaceofWar.net) and professor of applied and social theater at the University of Manchester in the UK, in his research: why do people continue to practice and engage in theater during times of war and conflict? And, conversely, why do people assume that they do not?**

Speaking at the opening of the Salzburg Global Seminar session “Conflict Transformation through Culture: Peace-Building and the Arts”, Thompson introduced the 63 Salzburg Global Fellows gathered in the Great Hall to his time/space matrix.

At the nexus of these two axes – time in one direction, space perpendicular – is the ongoing war or conflict (“the bombs are landing on your head”).

The space axis reaches to the next town away from the fighting, to refugee camps, to countries over the border offering asylum, eventually reaching diaspora communities.

Time reaches from the current situation to months, years and eventually generations later.

Within this matrix lie many time and space combinations: the diaspora or refugee community at the time of war, or the next generation now living in the original place of conflict are just two examples. For these different groups, in different spaces and times, there are different reasons why they engage in theater or indeed any other artistic or cultural pursuit; as either outsiders assisting this artistic expression or insiders in the communities we need to recognize and respect these different motivations and interests.

If the assumption isn’t just simply that art doesn’t happen in times of war (a false conception Thompson discovered in his research ahead of a trip to northern Sri Lanka in 2000 when another academic posited in her book that theater doesn’t happen in the Tamil areas because of the war despite the dynamic and diverse theater scene that existed in the conflict-riddled towns and villages), then the often, equally misinformed, assumption is that the art that *should* exist in this particular space and time is that which directly addresses the ongoing conflict.

Thompson’s 14 years of research have found that this is often not the case – the closer people are to the

conflict, in both their space and time, the less likely they are to center that art around the conflict. In fact, in this space and time the vast majority of the art created, be that theater, music, dance, or any other medium, is focused on anything but the conflict, with the purpose of forgetting about the war around them. They are not creating art *because* of the conflict, but *in spite* of it.

It is also in this space that one often finds a lot of art aimed at children, enabling them to distance themselves from the conflict that engulfs their daily lives (or in the case of northern Sri Lanka, providing theater directors with an audience and outlet before the nightly curfew was imposed).

Donors and artists seeking to help these communities in the thralls of war should take this need to distance themselves from war into consideration when they formulate their programs, advised Thompson.

Moving away from the center of this matrix, however, allows for differing needs and perspectives, but some of the typical arts and peace-building projects found in these other times and spaces also encounter difficulties.

Many arts projects in the same space but at a later time as the



original conflict focus on justice and reconciliation, often as if the two terms were totally complimentary or even synonymous. But in truth, these two themes are not always naturally aligned. To achieve a sense of justice for one community can be at the expense of establishing reconciliation with another. And to seek reconciliation can sometimes leave some victims without a sense of justice for past grievances. Sometimes we have to suspend one to achieve the other, and we have to realize that sometimes we fail the communities we're trying to serve by either foisting one or the other upon them or hindering the development of both.

Further along the time and often also the space axes is art that focuses on remembrance and commemoration. These are often focused on the predominant narrative of available testimony, which can be problematic for those who feel excluded from that narrative. Focus on remembrance and commemoration also leads to the dismissal of projects that aim to help communities forget the conflict. Communities are frequently told they must remember, they must commemorate past conflicts – and they must have a right to this – but equally they must have the right to not do so; they must have the right to silence. But

that is not to say that non-remembrance must be a passive silence – it can be loud and joyous. Much like the art at the nexus of the time and space and war – it can be a celebration of life, rather than a commemoration of the dead.

In communities that have faced long divisions, there exists in peace-building art the “disease” of “Romeo and Julietism” or “Romeo and Julietitis,” warned Thompson. There have been a multitude of theater productions that center around the idea of a Palestinian girl falling in love with an Israeli boy, or a Hutu with a Tutsi, or a Northern Irish Catholic with a Protestant, and so on. Whilst these productions have the noble idea that they are exemplifying the overcoming of division, they are also reaffirming that division and helping to maintain the very narrative the art is trying to change. There are in fact many other divisions within communities, such as generational, that are overlooked in these stereotypical narratives. Addressing these divisions can offer the possibility of overcoming the main division. Also, there is nothing wrong with focusing on helping one community to heal, before expecting it to address its issues with the other.

Ultimately, many of these issues surrounding what art is appropriate

at what point stems two problematic core teachings, argued Thompson. One is Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs which places creativity at the top of the pyramid, meaning this should only be satisfied once the basic physiological and safety (as well as love and belonging and esteem) needs have been met; needs that the most under threat in times of war and conflict.

The second stems from Theodor Adorno's saying “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric”. Adorno implied that to create art about suffering was to denigrate that suffering.

Both these teachings deny the importance of arts during and after conflict. But time and again it is proven that even when their basic needs are not being met, people still crave outlets that allow them to escape the misery they live in and to remember the experiences they have endured.

Thompson closed with a quote from Pablo Picasso, who famously depicted the horrors of the Spanish Civil War with his painting *Guernica*: “Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war.”

Just as art can help communities and individuals distract themselves or heal the scars of war, it too can be a weapon. Not all art is positive, warned Thompson.



Henrietta Norton poses a question during the opening session, held in the Great Hall of Schloss Leopoldskron





Salzburg Global Seminar's home at Schloss Leopoldskron is surrounded by well-maintained parkland, once home to Max Reinhardt's garden theater. During lunch breaks and in the evenings, feel free to explore and take a walk around the lake. Reception can also provide maps for those who like to jog!

## Hot Topic: “What is the importance of the arts in conflict resolution?”

“ For me, it's much more than art, it's about culture and all of human creativity. Bringing that human creativity to various difficult and dangerous situations is challenging, but, at its best, that cultural creativity can generate solutions that other forces that have tried to combat this for a very long time simply cannot do. We need to bring to bear all that we are as human beings and to recognise that culture can be the root of conflict that through recognising its force find other ways to get around it.

There is a huge wall of prejudice about art and culture generally across the board. We just need to get to tell the story. ”

**Peter Jenkinson**

*Session 532 Facilitator;*

*Co-creator of Culture+Conflict, UK*

“ Culture works with human emotions, and we assume very often that we act as rational beings, but actually, we are not rational beings with a full understanding of our actions that we are engaged in but actually very often as we know from neuroscience from behavioural sciences, we are not rational beings. We're touched by things on a very, very impulsive level and one of the things that art and culture can do is to look much deeper at the more important attributes to make a genuine change to people's lives. Sometimes we're bad at telling the story but sometimes we absolutely over claim as well. There was a great poster I picked up a little while ago in Dublin in 2010 that said “Art won't change the world, so go volunteer in a soup kitchen, you pretentious f-k.” And I think sometimes we need to remember the subtlety with which we work and not to claim too much in the wrong place. ”

**Shelagh Wright**

*Session 532 Facilitator;*

*Director, Mission Models Money, UK*

“ Art has been historically very important in conflict zones, both actually maintaining some conflicts and helping people to live through them and to resolve them. There is a kernel of work out there that is struggling to bring communities together or enable communities to commemorate or talk about or remember issues that are important to them. ”

**James Thompson**

*Professor, University of Manchester, UK*

“ I have been actively involved in conflict transformation between India and Pakistan. It is extremely important in looking at how civil society engagement and cultural engagement can help in transforming conflict, transforming perceptions, how we look at the other and that whole process of otherization. As part of that, there is a continual sense of unlearning what we have learnt before and then the process of relearning anew about culture in different perspectives and that provides a framework for rehumanization of other societies. ”

**Seema Sridhar**

*Journalist, The Times of India, India*