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## **Beyond Words: *Paint Your Life*<sup>TM</sup>—An International System for Transforming How We Think About Ourselves and Others**

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### **Abstract**

This paper outlines an ongoing qualitative review of themes that have emerged across the various sessions of the *Paint Your Life* program which was developed over the last 15 years. The author discusses the potential for *Paint Your Life* to disrupt hegemonic discourse about art, artists, and community development. Based on the qualitative data collected from across different international sessions the author suggests that *Paint Your Life* offers a radical means for re-imagining international education policies and art discourse, including the ways in which the arts, in the hands of various community groups can create “border crossing” between artists and non-artists, between school and community, between cultural distances, and between self and “Other.” The early research into this program anticipates how *Paint Your Life* might contribute to anti-oppressive aesthetic community projects.

## Introduction

With eleven international solo exhibitions, most from civic institutions, Jacquelyn Thunfors has etched a unique and innovative path from the United Nations, in both New York and Mexico City, to London, Spain, Athens, Pretoria and Durban, South Africa, Hawaii, Shanghai, and Shenzhen, China. Dedicated to transmitting ideas without words (her trademarked concept: journalart), her paintings are generating a new communications standard for the "art" world. In response to her Olympic collection called *Grandfathers' Hands BCE Olympia*, Athens reviewers for the Greek free subway newspaper said in summation, "Therefore she has now changed the way we look at our entire history" (2004, para. 10). Her long range goal is to give long overdue recognition to those who have the ability to transcend language—reaching those whose words we cannot understand, whose books we cannot read. Dr. Johann Broodryk, author, educator and expert on the subject of "ubuntu"—the concept that we are all equal, and responsible for each other on this planet—told an exhibition audience that Thunfors' work entitled *Birth Mother of Us All* (2004), a travelling South African exhibition, "exemplifies this essential African core concept" (J. Thunfors, personal communication with author, May 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

Thunfors' founding of the now trademarked international *Paint Your Life* workshops is the result of this growing demand from so many international artists and others who recognize this new and deep futuristic "art" leap, dedicated to "the viewer" in his/her own cultural milieu. Self-taught, Thunfors is convinced "art" is within each of us—a deep collection of ideations that can be released, to share with others, if we only can find the spark. Having a huge international family... in Spain, Sweden London, Greece... she knew, instinctively, that transmitting ideas without words could become a crucial step in bringing people together across many diverse cultures.

Citing Langer (1957), Eisner (2008) argues that the arts "provide access to qualities of life that literal language has no great power to disclose" (p. 7). As Eisner points out, arts-based expression enables us to 1) "address the qualitative nuances of any given situation, 2) generate empathy and 3) provide a fresh perspective so that our old habits of mind do not dominate our reactions with stock responses" (p. 10). From China, to Africa and Europe, *Paint Your Life* (PYL) has opened personal doors to creativity, revealed hidden talents and aptitudes, and empowered participants with new ideas, original art concepts, and magnetic insights that can change their worlds. As defined by Thunfors (2009):

*Paint Your Life* is a radical fast track to the creative unconscious. It is a system of creative experiences for artists, teachers, students, or anyone who secretly knows with the "right system" their ideas could appear and change our world. *Paint Your Life*

involves a set of interlocking artistic processes that are aimed at unlocking the creative potential in every individual. (p. 45)

PYL sessions have been conducted in various countries with a host of different groups; from classroom teachers in Howard County, MD, USA, to business executives and philanthropists in China, incarcerated women in Hawaii, USA, and community leaders in Greece. The *Paint Your Life* program may be completed in one day-long session, or spread out across a two half days depending on the needs of the group.

### **Theoretical Framework**

According to Gablik (1991), “modern society has emerged in a single evolutionary arena—the West. It represents a systematic reversal of the values by which people in traditional societies have always lived” (p. 16). In keeping with this worldview, she adds:

The emergence of modern art during the early decades of the (20<sup>th</sup>) century resulted from the coalescence of certain component ideas that form the basic structure of modern society: secularism, individualism, bureaucracy, and pluralism. These variables have formed the core of modernity. (p. 16)

One of the goals of arts-based practices is to dislocate the center of ideological powers including modernist notions of High Art that reproduce exclusionary and oppressive forms of pedagogy and knowledge production (Davis & Butler-Kisber, 1999; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Finley, 1998; Paley, 1995; Eisner, 2008; Gatzambide-Fernandez, 2013). The privileging of Eurocentric ideals and the silencing of marginalized and colonized cultures, languages, and races through art is paralleled by scientific and objective modes of inquiry that encourage people “towards a ‘hands-off’ or disembodied approach to what we do” (Finley, 1998, p. 20).

Designed specifically to enable participants (mostly non-artists) to “speak” across cultural and individual differences, the *Paint Your Life* experiences simultaneously embrace the individual in relation to the community, and highlights through process and product a non-hegemonic exchange of ideas. As such, it remains possible that art, when “considered as a form of social dialogues and as a forum of participatory practice, has provided an interpretation of citizenship that is democratic and community centered” (Hyungsook, 2014, p. 57).

*Paint Your Life* is not a solitary experience but rather is one that requires communal engagement with others in the group. Courtland et al. (2005), “explain that the interpretive community also fulfills an important role in the construction of meaning” (p. 5). As a lived and embodied interaction between artists and the (art)work, and with others, the PYL interaction is initially a “private affair” in which artists and material work “together to

produce an interpretation” (p. 5) and that artistically inviting, “other voices into this relationship helps us to extend the range of the conversation to include other members in the interpretive community” (p. 5).

The participants and the sequence of *Paint Your Life* games intersect and interweave with each other based on the following basic principles: 1) that art is context specific, thus emphasizing the interactions between cultures, language, and creativity that, 2) de-centers the notion of the “individual” in favor of critically collective and community-oriented ways of knowing the world, and 3) that art is never “neutral” (Baxandall, 1972).

As a form of (visual) poetry, Barone (2000), quoting Suzanne Langer, refers to art as “a composed and shaped apparition of a new human experience” (p. 23). As such, art emerges from between the cracks of traditional prose, which is more linear and logical in its construction. As a collective semblance of apparitions, dreams, beliefs, and knowledges, the work of *Paint Your Life* provokes a sense of empathy (Barone, 2000, p. 192) and as Gablik (1991) reflects, “it is the act of empathetic identification that is crucial, and healing” (p. 74).

### **The Gaming Sequence**

The *Paint Your Life* system is built on a series of seven short (45 min) “games,”<sup>1</sup> designed sequentially to build upon one another. Each experience (or game) reflects a broader theme central to discourses around the value of the arts to inquiry, teaching, and social change. The sequence is developed specifically to move between experiences that encourage participants to look inward using their creative minds-eye and self-reflection, balanced with aesthetic experiences that look “outward” toward the space, place, and persons in the surrounding environment. The result is a system which enables participants to think about the “push and pull” ways in which they think, to focus on the process rather than the product, and to be open to a myriad of possible outcomes. Slowness and mindfulness are key.

#### **Game One: In Transito**

***Themes include: Beliefs and letting go.***

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<sup>1</sup> The term game here is used to denote an activity which is play-based and involves risk taking and elements of unpredictability or ambiguity.

According to Thunfors (2009):

All art is perishable. Ink runs. Oil paint cracks. Glue weakens and discolors. Acid eats. Canvas punctures. Glass breaks. Heat melts. Cold cracks. Moisture opens. Worms eat. Color fades. (p. 15)

*In transito* is a game that examines themes of emergence and beliefs. Participants engage with the aesthetics of the transitory. Using a plain, average sized envelope, participants are to design the entire envelope with someone special in mind, with the intention of mailing that envelope to that person at a later date. In contrast to social networking, uses of envelopes instead of Facebook and tweeting to communicate, what is found or discovered in the process? This experience asks participants to both honor and challenge what they believe about art and about the relationships we create as human beings. Art that is created with care and reflection, with a willingness to “let it go” reminds participants of the value of process over product. As TV show character Chris Stevens from *Northern Exposure* (1990) states in an episode called Burning Down the House, “The self is that which is the process of becoming. Art? Same thing.”

Thunfors (2009) reflects that:

More valuable than the result is training your eye to vision a design in a very small space. Also, the unseen space-the backside-will begin sparking you for attention, maybe stimulating you to compose an ideation that moves both eye and mind to the reverse space, doubling the challenge, doubling the potential. (p. 16)

As participants are mindful of their use of space, and the person to whom they are writing the envelope, they muse on the unseen and potential within the transitory or ephemeral nature of relationships. As Figure 1 (below) illustrates, the envelopes use color, patterns, shapes, and words in relationship to one another to convey the story of a relationship between the artist/sender and the receiver.



Figure 1. Howard County, Maryland, USA, 2011

### **Game Two and Game Five: Time Freeze/Visual Personality**

*Themes include: Who am I? A process of discovery. Memories.*

This begins as a list generated by each of the participants in which everyone names their 26 “favorite” things such as favorite ice cream, favorite movie, artist, and architectural style in an interview with a fellow participant. This outline becomes an illustrated version of each participant’s life in Game Five. The list is used by a partner in the group, who generates a portrait based on the information provided on the list, creatively interpreting how to convey each of those items in relationship to one another. The results are shared with the person about whom it was created. Partners are often surprised by the various ways that their lists are re-interpreted by their partner.



Figure 2. Shanghai, China, 2013

As Thunfors notes, “No one will ever be you. No one will ever replicate the precise personae you have constructed and become. Only you can become its visual architect” (2009, p. 19). The final product becomes a collage of sorts, one which re-presents who we are as unique individuals as a composition constructed by our PYL game-partner. Thunfors explains, “There is no one pattern for this except the one you devise. Each person chooses different items from their list than others probably would. Some items seem useless and are. There are no rules” (2009, p. 32).

Figure Two (above) shows the artist sharing with the game-partner and how he interpreted her list of items, and then created a collage-like composite of the various items on the list. But even more, he was creating a “portrait” of how he imagines the items on her list could be created to tell a unique story.

### **Game Three: Inside-out**

*Themes include: Self-perception/how others perceive me.*

Using a large (28”x32”) piece of white or light brown roll paper taped to a hard surface such as an easel or cardboard, participants are asked to explore their workshop space, going outdoors or by large windows where they can find spaces that juxtapose an inside space with an outside space. Thunfors (2009) suggests, “You are looking for an inspirational scene, inside to out, or outside to in, that enables you to give an unusual new experience to the person who sees this spatially innovative drawing” (p. 25). As Figure Three shows, the artist is creating a “dual” focus, on what is both inside and outside the building. The exercise



challenges the artist and viewer to think spatially, and about how positionality affects perception. The artist begins to ask themselves, “What do I focus on? What is most important here? What details matter? What is the frame between what is shown inside and what is shown to be outside?”



Figure 3. Howard County, Maryland, USA, 2011

#### **Game Four: Boat Dancing**

**Themes include: Power/empower ... “the invisible force.”**

Using a large piece of roll paper participants select three colors (of chalk or pencil) of their choosing and identify an object/space to draw such as a wall clock or stairwell. Sitting comfortably, the person keeps their eyes focused on the thing to be drawn, and commits to NOT looking at the paper upon which they are drawing. Using their “minds-eye,” the individual draws what they see, three times, each time with a different color (never lifting their hand off the page nor looking at the drawing itself until it’s completed). Such a process requires a great deal of *faith* in the process and *trust*. In explaining this game, Thunfors tells her readers, “Without probably being aware of it, your brain has become a vast onion-layered globe of experience ... today you are going to train yourself to lean completely on that great unknown inside onion” (2009, p. 39).



As such, “the design appears without your knowledge. Your left brain has dozed while your hand flew around what you saw” (Thunfors, 2009, p. 41). In Figures 4a and 4b (below) there are multiple layers of lines and colors, overlapping and intersecting through the spontaneous gestures of the artist. The experience is, and one participant described it, “pure joy.”



*Figure 4a.* Athens, Greece, 2014



*Figure 4b.* Oxford, Maine, USA, 2011

**Game Six: Outside-in**

*Themes include: Conflict, responsibility, and acceptance of others.*

In Game Six, participants transform the inner self toward relationships with the “outside” world in creative and unexpected ways. Self-confidence means discovering a place and purpose in the universe. The process reminds us that so much of what drives us every day are elements of the world which we cannot “see” with our physical eyes. Figure 5 (below) renders what is the interior landscape of the artist’s perception of family connections. In Game Six the “I” becomes the “eye” and pushes the artist to re-create abstract relationships that span time and space, with the larger world. Thunfors (2009) reminds us that “Most everything around us appears square, straight, cubed, linear. But in actuality we ride on a curving ball of a planet, spinning tipped in space. We know it. We read about it. But we can’t actually see it” (p. 47).

In this game, each individual re-connects with the people and experiences that have influenced them the most, drawing on the worlds which they cannot (or can no longer) see. “We also can’t,” Thunfors adds, “see all the myriad faces of the people who have loved us, taught us, nourished and trained us to be the person we have become” (2009, p. 47).



Figure 5. Howard County, Maryland, USA, 2011

### **Game Seven: Transmission**

*Themes include: transmitting general ideas, transmitting for social change, transmitting combinations of ideas that generate power.*



*Figure 6. Black Moon Rising, by J. Thunfors, 2008*

Game Seven synthesizes the prior six game-experiences, and harnesses the push-and-pull of interior and external influences into an expression of desire for change between the self and the world. Here, it is all about border crossing. The focus is on a topic or issue the PYL participant desires to “see” from an alternative perspective, or a problem they wish to solve. The larger purpose is to re-imagine self and the world in more interconnected ways. Thunfors writes, “Cross-cultural global art starts here” (2009, p. 65), thus transmitting alternative ways of identifying and solving problems; global challenges or personal obstacles. Referring to her work *Black Moon Rising* (Figure 6, above), created in honor of South African liberation from apartheid, Thunfors says, “To most white people, this is an interesting painting. To South African blacks (*sic*), it’s both a Valentine and a mirror” (2009, p. 73).

In Game Seven, participants not only imagine change for themselves, but communicate for others how to create solutions to the human, economic, environmental or political issues we share.

### ***Paint Your Life* and Arts-Based Education**

The rising tide of standardized education reform policy (see Thomas & Bower, 2012; McDermott, et al., 2015) in many parts of the world, corporate management of public schools, and a one-size-fits-all model of measurement, are rapidly dissolving our creative power as professional educators to create meaningful life-changing experiences in our classrooms (Gouzouasis, et al., 2013).

To combat this dilemma, the *Paint Your Life* creative game system empowers educators and students to discover their own, often well-hidden, aptitudes. In the face of a one-size-fits-all “career and college readiness” track promulgated by Race to The Top in the United States, new curricula and standardized testing regime increasingly narrow the curricula and replace divergent thinking with convergent (one right answer) approaches to teaching and learning. It is through systems such as *Paint Your Life* that educators and students might realize “the potential for many careers, in a long lifetime, lies within the head of nearly every human being” (Thunfors 2009, p. 32).

In a socio political and technical world that is shifting beneath our feet at a rapid pace, divergence of ideas, and of each person’s potential though a necessary skill is highly under-utilized in formal systems of education. The goals of the PYL system, as an essential new training ground for educators, are to enable participants to:

- A. Truly enjoy exploring creative *differentiation* strategies in all classrooms. Exposing differentiation strategies to students provides the best result “surprises.”
- B. Celebrate the fascinating intellectual complexity that *culturally-inclusive* classrooms provide. Higher levels of personal growth and student growth can be generated by the PYL system.
- C. Develop problem-based *authentic lessons and assessments*. Via their PYL insights, these become a joy to construct and implement in the classroom. When evaluating students whose performance challenges the norm, educators find themselves *considering entirely new points of view*.
- D. *Reclaiming the creative capacities of educators*. Those previously trained in the arts usually discover, via the *Paint Your Life* games, that they have lost many years of *creative flow* working on a poorly selected singular wavelength—a wavelength that limited their own potential. Educators *conceive new visions* for their own professional goals.

In the words of one educator-participant from Howard County, MD:

*...fascinating topic to think about how to unleash the creativity amongst students, and spur on their thinking and analyzing in new ways. (PYL participant, written PYL personal evaluation, 2011).*

As to the impact of this innovative PYL concept on our educational systems, ancient philosopher Heraclitus said it perfectly: One never descends into the river twice. Each experience in life changes us and we are never the same as yesterday.

### **Beyond the Classroom**

*Paint Your Life* is a transformative process. From the outset, participants are asked to “let go” of any focus on the product and embrace the experiences as they unfold. When leading a PYL workshop, this manuscript author and Thunfors (as session facilitators) have collected and begun initial analysis of the experience, looking for “generalizable” themes. Using video analysis, personal notes, and follow-up interviews from various sessions between 2008 and 2016 and across three continents, we have identified the following benefits to participants:

**Time** spent on each interlocking game is allocated and compressed, not only according to the game itself, but according to the unique pace of participants themselves. Acceleration improves response in most cases. One participant stated, “*I LOVE IT. It was very motivating and interestingly structured. My flesh and spirit knew it was inevitable while my mind relied on TIME by being patient.*” (J. Thunfors, personal communication, December 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009).

**The atmosphere** is arranged, changed and adjusted continuously, in direct rhythm to each game and its participants.

**A hidden algorithm of the group is activated.** Those self-confidently risking conceptual fluidity often animate their neighbors, whose wisdom traditionally emanates in words, not shapes. One participant reflected:

*You opened a creative door to things I have never thought of before—a whole new dimension. So many of your ideas I have passed on to my students. Like a stone in a pond your ideas just ripple. You open up the abilities we had as a child and lost. (J. Thunfors, personal communication, Dec. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009).*

**Each person receives individual game-to-game support and nourishment.** As mindsets unpeel, energy flags and soars, dips, flares, and often roars ahead of the hand. There are those who decide to deviate and do something different, transcending the situation through

differentiation. One woman, a teacher and community coordinator from one of the South Africa workshops shared: *Your workshop allowed my soul to dance again. I felt a connectivity to my inner being, a place I had long forgotten about. The workshop was life changing.* (J. Thunfors, personal communication, Dec 10<sup>th</sup>, 2009).

**It is recognized that comparative motivational insights are the norm.** Experienced PYL facilitators share insights from many other cultural norms and often document professional breakthroughs, recognize and define standard motivational blocks. The seven games combined become a brain-changing mechanism. The process enables users to tap hidden aptitudes that generate new ideas that appear in images not words. Following her workshop in China (2014), Thunfors writes:

*Never, ever, have I experienced such a raw outpouring of original work toward the end. Each, in a unique way, bared their souls, their childhood, their dedication toward life and their own lives with unbelievable imagery that they, themselves, did not realize was so very special.* (J. Thunfors, personal communication, March 22nd, 2014).

**There is assurance that the joy of the mutual “group search” enthusiasm spread consistently higher** with each game "completion-startup again" sequence. Team joy evolves and carries each person through their own singular and limited mindset ("limited" meaning the unspoken agony of each of us, stranded in this world with only one brain, one set of experiences to lean on.)

**Ensures thoughts processed through the “timed-group funnel” can complicate singular leisurely thought.** This is otherwise known as the "bounce effect." Many professionals, in many disciplines, have never experienced this invisible force vector, vis-a-vis singular brain power.

**Empathy dominates.** A Greek chorus swells and swells as the papers pile up around their ankles, the day progressing toward its unique norm.

**Group members are guided to offer advice and suggestions to each fellow participant at the end of the day** (for those who wish guidance or response) according to their own wisdom and applicable experience. Inside each person resides a discovery factor. Each person's library is unique.

*They came at 9 ... stayed through 6 with a two hour analysis session at the end with much deep philosophical discussion, laughter, tears, huge shared sadness, etc. They all hugged and some kissed me before they left ... carefully wrapped each paper and*

*could not believe they could take their papers home!!* (J. Thunfors, personal communication, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014).

**The facilitator takes responsibility for a summation of achievements of the group**, as well as offers personalized guidance and recommendations for each participant, if requested. Questions and discussion evolve: There is a focus on innovation in each group; pointing out things that are innovative; what is a point of contrast; what “stands out; find similarities in the group.

The prima materia wrought from *Paint Your Life* sessions draws creation out from what has been “left out” of our daily conscious thinking. Tasks like this require risk. The PYL experience requires a willingness to let go of outcomes and to arm ourselves with a sense of faith in the fire of dark chaos in order to forge new life. Bringing ourselves as conscious creators into the equation means cutting loose from the anchors of absolute knowledges and singular visions. From the variety of PYL facilitators who have worked all over the world, the PYL system offers communities creative alternatives to prescribed or entrenched “realities”--transforming worlds through images. For example, as Thunfors recounts after one session in South Africa how:

A newly hired depressed Manny, in a wheelchair, participated in a KZNSA (Kwa Zulu Natal Society for the Arts-oldest SA cultural society) session there. Told his supervisor later that the experience transformed his entire life, enabling him to understand the huge potential within his own head to rewrite the scenario of his life. They told me his work team recognized a completely different attitude... (J. Thunfors, in personal communication with author, February 11<sup>th</sup>, 2017).

### **Crisis, Community, and Creativity**

“White people are in decline. They will eventually disappear. What will the typical face of the future be like?” (Thunfors, 2009, p. 64)

As a society, we stand at a historical moment of extremes: On the one hand, a rise in the number of hate crimes (i.e. Charlottesville VA, USA), acts of gun violence across the United States, and international acts of rogue and state sanctioned terror. On the other hand, we stand at an amazing revolutionary precipice that demands more than courage. It requires the imagination, a capacity to create the futures we wish to see, and *the power to act* to make that future manifest. In the words of Max Haiven of Occupy Wall Street:

Our crisis of power is linked to our crisis of imagination: how can we envision and actualize resilient and powerful alternatives? How can we build everyday commons,



from community gardens to housing cooperatives to worker-owned factories to grassroots participatory democracies? (2012, para 3).

Systemic practice of a *Paint Your Life* process can empower participants (especially in Game Six and Game Seven) to articulate a vision for the world, and to express new ways of seeing themselves *in relationship to that world*. Just as Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (1995) engages spect-actors with "rehearsal for reality," the PYL experience invites participants an opportunity to rehearse their re-imagining of their worlds. *Paint Your Life* is a response to the crisis of deadening imagination in an age of technocapitalism and corporate control, where our every personal data point is mined for the profits of private interests, and the dwindling of public spaces creates a dwindling of free creative spaces.

While the possibility for *Paint Your Life* to serve as a social justice practice is still in its emergent phase, there is growing evidence from sessions across the globe for its potential to challenge systems of oppression. As is with everything about the arts and liberation ideologies, context is everything. *Paint Your Life* does not explicitly embed discourses of justice or equity. Its potential as a critical discourse currently remains limited, relying on the desired expressions of the participants, for whom an existing position of privilege may remain unchallenged. But, developed out of organic collaboration between the participants, each PYL session is also place-based and community-specific, and so it is equally possible to become a means for challenging privilege of others in the group, or in the community. In the PYL process, experiences of marginalization, oppression, even violence, might find a place to be seen and heard. From here, groups and individuals can explore ways to transform systems that perpetuate crisis.

I agree with critical pedagogy scholars that the transformative power of art is often overly romanticized (Gatzambide-Fernandez, 2013). Social justice advocates (myself included) would agree that "The call to embrace creativity does not typically include a call for equality, decent and meaningful work, social care and compassion, and social justice" (Haiven, 2012, para 3).

Yet, it is equally true that when organized in the necessary places and at necessary times and with necessary persons, creative experiences may be the most powerful instrument we each possess.

The PYL process cannot occur in isolation. It requires relational and collaborative efforts to be successful. The foundation of the seven games is in *an exchange*, a communication that uses images rather than words, and so attempt to bridge across linguistic and cultural divides. Haiven (2012) states, "Only when we recognize that creativity is a collaborative process (not

an individual possession) can creativity help us transform our lives and our world creatively, and employ creativity for the good of everyone” (para 3).

Another potential way to use PYL for deconstructing privilege could be to design a session specifically focused on an issue (i.e. “racism in your community” or “LGBQ inclusion in schools”). The facilitator can, instead of taking a “backseat” or passive role, create an intentional discourse with the participants which centers the seven games and the group discussions on a focused critical mode of inquiry.

The power of PYL is in the outcomes--what are the potential “ripple effects” that the PYL session will have on the future actions of its participants? In her book *Paint Your Life* (2009) Thunfors recalls how a group of male participants from Durban, South Africa examined the issue of AIDS in their community using the PYL system because, “Kwa-Zulu-Natal AIDS deaths are highest per capita worldwide” (2009, p. 70). Their images (such as one depicting a man standing up to his chin inside an oversized condom) communicated the need for more prevention awareness, a call for more community action, and allowed for a discussion they all agreed was vitally necessary for their survival. That man-in-a-condom artwork (a poster made in Game Seven) became the spring board for a poster-campaign for public awareness, and the men in that PYL session became the agents for change. As a form of community-based advocacy, PYL can make possible, “aesthetically displaying thus making concrete, a group’s core values and beliefs through ritual, ceremony, and other public presentations” (Anderson, 2010 p. 3).

*Paint Your Life* embodies the processes embedded in certain indigenous art programs such as those identified in the Participatory Community Arts Project (Institute for Development website, nd) that reflects the “surge of participatory and community-based art projects all over the world.” PYL provides a local identity/global focus, where participants engage in “transmission for change” (Thunfors, 2009, p. 71) so as to, “allow audiences different ways to engage with and experience the art work ... that are often site-specific and make use of objects and ideas from the communities” (Institute for Development website, nd).

*Paint Your Life* is a not a top-down creative system. The bigger goal of the PYL system is to educate community members to become facilitators who can work within their own communities (free of external, oftentimes colonizing influences), and as such create artwork that provides a more complicated and self-narrated portrayal of their community. *Paint Your Life* has the potential to build networks of resistance and change. As Thunfors asks, “Is there anything better at which a true artist could aim?” (2009, p. 71).

The imagination—our capacities to be creative -- is central to identifying and solving the crisis we face in the world today. We will not find the solutions to ending problems like poverty, racism, war, or global climate change on a standardized test; we create them in the worlds that do not yet exist. *Paint Your Life* offers a bridge across the linguistic and geographical barriers that currently exist between cultures and our individual lived-experiences. Without words, we transmit ourselves and our individual identities, into shared collective spaces where hope and the imagination are inextricable from one other.

*As in algebra, the challenge of the formula equalizes both sides.*

*And what about beauty? We all love beautiful things. Beauty nourishes the eyes.*

*We marvel at the skill, the technique, the color, but we don't change our lives.*

*We don't feed from it. We don't alter our thinking because of it.*

*It doesn't spur us to action or enable us to adjust our vision to understand the visions of another.*

*That is the difference.* (J. Thunfors, 2000, p. 71)

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### **About the Author**

Morna McDermott McNulty, PhD., is a professor in the College of Education at Towson University, Maryland, USA. Her teaching and research focus on the intersections among creativity, social justice, and public education. She has worked in public school contexts for over 25 years. Books include *The Left Handed Curriculum* and *The Activists Handbook for the Education Revolution* (Information Age Press). McNulty's first novel, entitled *Blood's Will: Speculative Fiction, Existence, and Inquiry of Currere*, is forthcoming with Peter Lang Publishers; in addition, she has authored or co-authored over 20 peer-reviewed articles and 20 book chapters. McNulty co-produced and co-edited a documentary film titled *Voices of Baltimore: Life under Segregation* (2018) with Dr. Gary Homana. She regularly blogs at [www.educationalchemy.com](http://www.educationalchemy.com). McNulty lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her partner and two children.

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