

Marty Pottenger Profile

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“This work involves tremendous experimentation, risk taking, invention, creativity and courage that is both exhilarating and unnerving.”

-- Marty Pottenger

Marty Pottenger is a critically acclaimed writer, director, and performer with more than 20 years of experience in creating and directing community-based arts initiatives. She uses art and art-making as a point of departure to “address social issues, reveal the underlying connection between people, and activate people’s inherent desire and momentum for justice and equity.” Her work is inspired by her need to make sense of the issues that people face in their lives and their work, and grounded in the concept of “aware listening.”

As Catherine Jo describes it in a 2003 article for Community Arts Network:

She looks for "heart snapshots," moments in which she felt a connection with her interviewees and could understand them — their humanness, their struggles. She then experiments with various media to express these moments in the manner she finds most strategic to the situation.

Pottenger defines her community locally, nationally, and internationally. She has gone underground to interview tunnel workers involved in New York City’s Water Tunnel #3, the largest public works project in United States (*City Water Tunnel #3*); traveled the country interviewing people from different classes, races, and ages — from multi-millionaires to minimum wage workers — about how they conceive & negotiate economics in their daily lives (*Abundance*); and interviewed paramilitary veterans in Yugoslavia to explore how people heal after having participated in, observed, or been connected to an atrocity such as the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999 (*Just War*).

In January 2005, Pottenger was invited to create and direct *home land security*, a yearlong community performance art project that addressed the impact of post-9/11 policies on life in Portland, Maine. The project was commissioned by the Center for Cultural Exchange, a local presenter, as a cultural response to a Border Patrol immigration raid that targeted immigrant and refugee communities and resulted in the detention and deportation of 10 Portland residents. The raid ignited fear and accentuated divisions within the city. It also galvanized leaders from diverse communities to stand together in support of those most affected by the raid. In the weeks following the raid, community leaders organized rallies and marches, and Portland’s mayor and city council, followed by the governor of Maine, passed a resolution and executive order prohibiting

city and state employees from asking anyone about their immigration status. While these actions were important expressions of solidarity with Portland's immigrant and refugee communities, the Center for Cultural Exchange believed that it was necessary to create an extended opportunity for meaningful reflection and dialogue about the issues raised by this deeply troubling event.

Pottenger's approach to creating community arts initiatives is grounded in more than 30 years of experience as a community organizer and activist within the union and feminist movements. She believes that the resource for the work comes from the people and the objective of the work is to help people locate the vision they already have and unleash initiative, rather than prescribe a situation or an outcome. For Pottenger, "no one is better or worse than anyone else, including the artist. You don't throw anyone away." The development of *home land security* reflected this commitment to a participatory process and the deep respect for each individual involved in the work.

Pottenger dedicated the first several months of the project to building relationships with community leaders and residents, listening to their stories, experiences, hopes, and concerns. She conducted extensive one-on-one interviews with more than 120 Portlanders of different races, classes, educational backgrounds, ages, and political persuasions. Pottenger has been using "the interview as a political act" since the beginning of her career as a community-based artist. "The transformative power of listening to another human being is critical to bring about liberation," she says. The interview process was followed by a series of story circles that brought together 30 Portlanders. While the interviews allowed people to reflect on their own experiences and identify their own fears and desires for Portland's future, the story circles created a space for social engagement and discourse that enabled people from considerably different backgrounds to move beyond what they already knew and develop a broader understanding of the complex issues raised by the immigration raid.

The interviews and story circles laid the groundwork for the creation of the community performance called *home land security*. Over the course of a month, Pottenger worked intensely with 10 community members to transform their interviews into a full-length performance in which individuals told their own stories, in their own words, reflecting the complex histories, experiences, and perspectives that make up the Portland community. The performers included a city council member, Portland's fire chief, the State Senate president, a Sudanese community leader, a member of the Micmac Nation, the president of the Portland NAACP, the director of the Episcopal Church's first Latino/a Mission in Northeastern U.S., a writer and performer who has been homeless for the last 10 years, a Kurdish/Iranian high school student, and a Somali-born Muslim high school student. A live band led by a French Canadian fiddler, with a Cambodian drummer and Bolivian charango player, accompanied the performers as they told their stories. *home land security* premiered in November 2005 at the Center for Cultural Exchange in Portland with three performances followed by extensive talkbacks with the cast, audience members, and Pottenger. A week later Pottenger facilitated two civic dialogues, open to everyone in the community, that provided a space to reflect on the dramatic changes in local, state, national, and global life since 9/11.

The performance and the civic dialogues that followed not only created a space for reflection and dialogue, but also empowered community leaders and residents to take a stand and effect concrete changes in city government on critical issues of equity and diversity. After her experience with *home land security*, Mayor Jill Duson publicly challenged a hiring decision by the city manager and the city council, in which a white candidate was selected over an African American candidate, even though the latter ranked higher during the screening process. In response to Mayor Duson's public stance and community organizing efforts led by several *home land security* participants, the city council convened a public hearing to listen to community members' concerns about the hiring process. In the end, the city manager and city council stood by their decision, but the experience reflected an important shift for Mayor Jill Duson and the community. When speaking about her decision to go public about this issue, Mayor Duson said that her work with *home land security* had given her back her voice and that she "didn't intend to lose it ever again." Another concrete outcome of the community organizing efforts around these issues was that the city manager agreed to make the city's director of Equal Opportunity a department head, giving this position greater power to address issues of equity and diversity in the city's policies and practices.

Due to the success of *home land security*, the City of Portland Department of Equal Opportunity and Multicultural Affairs and Portland School Board Department of Multicultural Affairs have invited Marty Pottenger to return to Portland for a three-year residency, beginning in April 2007. During this time, she will develop and lead the *Art and Equity Initiative (AEI)*, a citywide initiative that will address long-standing issues of prejudice, perceived bigotry, alienation, and discrimination within city government and the school system. This will enable her to explore in more depth, and on a larger scale, the potential for using art and creativity to enhance the process of policymaking and practice within city government and civic institutions. The initiative will begin with a planning period involving in-depth interviews, story circles, and community meetings, in order to canvass and connect stakeholders and identify concrete objectives that accomplish the goal of increasing equity. Next will come a period of experimentation, during which Pottenger will work with project participants and local artists to explore different ways that art and creativity can raise awareness about interpersonal and systemic forms of discrimination and to develop an arts-based methodology for developing and implementing policies that address issues of equity and diversity.

Recognizing the importance of building local capacity, Pottenger will train a diverse team of local artists to work with city government departments and civic institutions. These artists will be placed in multi-year residencies with key departments and institutions, during which they will create art about the issues facing the department/institution they are working with, facilitate workshops for the people who work there, and lead efforts to achieve identified objectives for increasing equity in their departments. In addition, Pottenger is working with local partners to build an organization that can provide the infrastructure to sustain the work over time. This endeavor will help develop funding strategies to support this work at the local level.

Pottenger would like the integration of art and policymaking to be a “way of doing business” in cities across the country. For that reason, AEI will include a rigorous evaluation and documentation process to allow the lessons learned in Portland to be shared with others who are interested in creating similar initiatives. AEI will convene a series of gatherings during the project where participants, local community members, and national guests can come together to think about this work. At the end of the two-year project, AEI will host a national gathering where city government officials can learn about the experience in Portland and explore the possibility of launching similar projects in their communities. Pottenger plans to recreate AEI in three other cities once her residency in Portland is over. However, she is cautious about approaching the work in a formulaic way and is committed in creating a model that reflects a spirit of creativity and invention.

A pioneer of community-based art, Pottenger currently sees the field as “a big laboratory” of experimentation, where relationships are being built and goals are being addressed at the grassroots level. In thinking about how the field can be more strategic, Pottenger cautions against aspiring for national visibility. Instead, she believes that the innovations currently taking place at the local level are critical to the development of the field and that there is an “ever-present need for concrete resources [that reflect] the long-term commitment and vision of the work itself.” While financial resources are essential, Pottenger thinks that it is equally important to create and maintain sustainable networks such as the ones created by the Animating Democracy Initiative and the American Festival Project, which allow everyone — artists and creators, community members and audiences, organizers and civic leaders, scholars, and funders — to engage in critical discourse and dialogue about how to create “even sharper, more powerful work. Work that increasing numbers of communities decide that they simply can’t afford to live without.”

Javiera Benavente is an artist, educator and organizer. She is a Cultural Organizer with the Arts & Democracy Project and a member of Food for Thought Books, a worker-owned collectively run bookstore in Western Massachusetts.