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Episode 151

Should Activist Artists & Cultural Organizers be Running for Office - Tom Tresser Says, "ABSOLUTELY!"

What if the solution to our democracy's crisis isn't another white paper or study—but an artist running for office?

In this episode, civic organizer and “public defender” **Tom Tresser** reveals why he feels America's nonprofit and creative sectors are missing in action when it comes to power, policy, and public trust. As arts funding shrinks and disinformation grows, Tom challenges creatives to stop “staying in their lane” and instead step up as leaders in civic life.

In it we'll:

- Learn how a small, unfunded coalition stopped the 2016 Olympics from coming to Chicago—and why that matters for creative change agents everywhere
- We'll also Discover why Tom thinks creative people are uniquely qualified to solve society's most funky problems—and how artistic skills and political strategies are cut from the same cloth

And inspired by a radical, hopeful model for building civic power from the ground up, rooted in creative intelligence, story making, and community action.

Notable Mentions

The 100K Project: Tom Tresser's initiative that seeks to train, and propel 100,000 people from the arts, nonprofit, social services, education, and science sectors (and their supporters) to run for local office or help those with our values run as champions of service, science, justice, equity, peace, creativity, and the public sector.

People

Bill Cleveland: Host of Art Is Change and long-time practitioner in arts-based community development and civic storytelling.

Tom Tresser: Chicago civic organizer, public defender of the public sector, and co-founder of No Games Chicago.

Richard M. Daley: Former Chicago mayor behind the 2016 Olympic bid effort.

Barack Obama: Then-senator and later president who supported Chicago's Olympic bid.

Sam Zell: Billionaire and owner of the Chicago Tribune, a supporter of the Olympic bid.

Senator Jesse Helms: Conservative senator known for attacks on the NEA.

Pat Robertson: Christian Coalition founder and major force in culture-war politics.

[Andres Serrano](#): Artist whose work Piss Christ became central to NEA controversies.

[The NEA Four](#): Performance artists whose denied NEA grants fueled national censorship debate.

[Frederick Douglass](#): Abolitionist and civic educator cited as a model for grassroots truth-telling.

[Paul Wellstone](#): U.S. senator whose “organize–advocate–run” triangle influences Tresser’s civic theory.

[Oprah Winfrey](#): Chicago cultural icon who supported the 2016 Olympic bid.

[Barbara Steveni](#): British artist and co-founder of the pioneering Artist Placement Group.

[Judy Munson](#): Composer of the Art Is Change theme and soundscape.

[Andre Nebe](#): Text editor for this episode.

Events

[Chicago 2016 Olympic Bid](#): Major civic initiative defeated by grassroots organizing.

[IOC Host City Vote – Copenhagen 2009](#): IOC meeting where Chicago was eliminated in the first round.

[NEA Culture Wars](#): National battle over arts funding, censorship, and cultural values.

[Performing Arts Communities Campaign to Save the NEA \(1991\)](#): Chicago-based advocacy mobilizing artists and audiences.

[The 100K Project](#): National initiative to train 100,000 creative people to run for local office.

[Opening of the Civic Lab \(2013\)](#): Launch of a civic makerspace for democratic literacy and organizing.

Organizations

[Center for the Study of Art & Community](#): Producer of Art Is Change and national leader in arts-based civic engagement.

[Art Is Change Podcast](#): The podcast exploring arts, culture, and democracy.

[League of Chicago Theatres](#): Chicago’s principal theater service organization.

[National Endowment for the Arts](#): Federal arts funder often at the center of political battles.

[Christian Coalition](#): Conservative political organization active in culture-war campaigns.

[Focus on the Family](#): Christian advocacy group active in the arts-funding debates.

[No Games Chicago](#): Volunteer coalition that stopped Chicago’s Olympic bid.

[International Olympic Committee](#): Governing body of the Olympic Games.

[The Civic Lab](#): Civic makerspace founded by Tom Tresser.

[National Guild for Community Arts Education](#): Partner for civic leadership training for creatives.

[PBS](#): Public broadcasting network referenced in arts-funding discussions.

[Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts](#): U.S. national arts institution.

[Harvard Project Zero](#): Research center whose “studio thinking” informs the leadership model.

[Americans for the Arts](#): National arts advocacy organization.

[Freesound.org](#): Community sound library used for audio effects.

Publications

[No Games Chicago \(Routledge\)](#): Tresser's book on defeating the Olympic bid.

[Oxford Economics Research on Olympic Mega-Projects](#): Analysis of the economic and civic impacts of hosting the Olympics.

[Christian Coalition Fundraising Letters \(Archive\)](#): Historic mailers used in culture-war fundraising.

[Artist Placement Group Documentation \(Tate\)](#): Archival record of the groundbreaking UK socially engaged art model.

Bill Cleveland: [00:00:01](#)

Hey there. What if the solution to our democracy's crisis isn't another white paper or study, but an artist running for office?

From the center for the Study of Art and Community, this is Artist Change, a chronicle of art and social change, where activist artists and cultural organizers share the strategies and skills they need to thrive as creative community leaders. My name is Bill Cleveland.

So in this episode, civic organizer and public defender Tom Tresser reveals why he feels America's nonprofit and creative sectors are missing in action when it comes to power policy and public trust.

As arts funding shrinks and disinformation grows, Tom challenges creatives to stop staying in their lane and instead step up as leaders in civic life.

His unfunded coalition stopped Chicago's Bid for the 2016 Olympics.

We'll also discover why Tom thinks creative people are uniquely qualified to solve society's most funky problems and how artistic skills and political strategies are. Are cut from the same cloth.

And by the end, I think we'll all be inspired by a radical, hopeful model for building civic power from the ground up, rooted in creative intelligence, story.

Bill Cleveland: [00:01:41](#)

Making, and community action.

Bill Cleveland: [00:01:45](#)

Part one a Public defender. Tom Tresser. Welcome to the show. How are you doing today?

Tom Tresser: [00:01:56](#)

So even though I think America's gone insane, I feel, I feel somewhat blessed, still doing hopefully good work this late in life. So I guess I'm. I'm looking at the glass half full or three quarters full. I guess that's, that's how I. I look at things.

Bill Cleveland: [00:02:15](#)

So let's start at the beginning of.

Bill Cleveland: [00:02:16](#)

The road that we're going to travel in the next few minutes, and that is that if you could introduce yourself in a few different ways, the first being who you are, the other being, if you do have a handle or a street name, what it would be. And number three is what's your work in the world? Which is not your job title.

Tom Tresser: [00:02:39](#)

Cool. So my name is Tom Tresor. I'm based in Chicago, and I call myself a public defender.

And when I say that, people go, wait a minute, you don't look like a lawyer. I don't play one on tv. However, in a place like Chicago, when I've done over 300 public meetings, when I say that, it sinks in.

Oh, I know what you mean. You mean the very concept of public, the very word itself.

Now, you have to remember, Chicago is a place where we sold our parking meters under Mayor Daleyza. We sold the bridge that connects Chicago to Indiana. We sold garages in the Loop. And so private firms now operate those things at great profit.

And I oppose all that. So I have to explain to people what this word means. And I often say to people at these meetings. How did you get to the meeting? Oh, I took the bus.

Hey, that's a public thing, ain't it? I drove. That's the public way. And you parked. You had red light. You didn't crash because there are green lights and red light.

You know, who here goes to the library? Who here loves their beaches and parks? Hands up. In about five minutes, whatever this meeting is, everybody's hand is up.

I just say, I'm just pausing on this for a minute before we talk about whatever brought us here tonight, is that we got a love on this thing called public. Because the other side has been working for 50 years to diminish it, cheapen it, sell it off, and destroy it. And all those in favor say aye.

And can I get. Can I get an amen? And so I feel that's my mission.

I mean, I feel that's underneath a lot of everything we're going to talk about and a lot of what's going on wrong in America today. So anyway, I call myself a public defender, civic educator.

Bill Cleveland: [00:04:30](#)

That's a great combo.

Tom Tresser: [00:04:32](#)

Yeah, yeah. And you said, what's the work?

Bill Cleveland: [00:04:35](#)

Yeah.

Bill Cleveland: [00:04:35](#)

What's your work in the world?

Tom Tresser: [00:04:37](#)

I would say in a tiny nutshell, it's to get the nonprofit sector to talk about and exercise power. Why is it so afraid to do so? Why are we so incompetent? We love to convene. We love to study. I want to have a T shirt. No more studies.

More studies, man. We love to study shit. We love to convene it. And we like to argue.

Like, if I present my paper to you, if I present my economic impact study of the arts to the Republican legislature, that'll show them. No, no, it doesn't do anything. So I don't care about persuasion anymore. I just want more votes than the other guys in order to get more votes.

It's a conversation about how do we get there? What's our path to power in order to govern for the common good and to save democracy in America.

And I find over 40 years, the arts and the nonprofit sector have been incompetent, reluctant, afraid. I don't know what the right word is to enter into that dialogue. I would say I'm trying to wean my peers off of being purposely powerless.

That's probably what I'm trying to do.

Bill Cleveland: [00:05:55](#)

So what was your path to this?

Tom Tresser: [00:05:58](#)

I came to Illinois in: [1980](#)

I'm a fill in the blank. And your initial concern is just yourself, your body. Right? I gotta work. I gotta get the next gig, whatever that gig is.

But then I started a Shakespeare company, and now all of a sudden, you got a little crew. You gotta make sure the lights are on, the newspaper ads are placed. You know what I mean? The business of a nonprofit.

So now you're concerned about, we have our season in place. So I was the board president, an ensemble member, and the managing director, all at the same time.

But then you start worrying about, what's the theaters like in the city of Chicago? What's our trade association, which we have one, the League of Chicago Theaters. And then you wonder, what about the arts altogether?

We have many, many arts organizations in a big city. How are they doing? And now I'm starting to think about the whole country. I mean, how does the NEA figure into all this? And you compare.

I'm talking about: [1980](#)

But you do a little research and you find out that West Germany, when it was West Germany, was giving the arts \$500 million. And the NEA in its best day was like, what, 220 million? So your sphere of awareness expands.

And I immediately started asking the question, where's our power? Why don't we get any love? We don't have any lobbyists. We are making meaning. We're delivering art. We're. We're entertaining the people.

We're working with the kids. It's self evident why the arts need to be supported in a country like America.

Isn't it true that the more creativity we have, the better our democracy is and the better our economy is? I think your work over the decades proves that 100,000 times, and yet it doesn't fulfill itself.

hat happened in the summer of: [1990](#)

under attack in the summer of: [1990](#)

Who the hell is that guy?

Senator Jesse Helms: [00:08:35](#)

Mr. President, senator from North Carolina. Mr. President, I thank the chair for recognizing me.

And I now, Mr. President, the senator from New York is absolutely correct in his indignation and in his description of the blasphemy of the so called artwork. I don't know Mr. Andre Serrano and I hope I never meet him because he's not an artist, he's a jerk.

Tom Tresser: [00:09:02](#)

Reverend Pat Robertson, he has something called.

He didn't have it in those days, but he was soon to start the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, all these names are coming up and they were all attacking the arts viciously. For those of you that can remember back to those days, remember the NEA4. So bonus prize.

If anyone on this broadcast can email Bill, you'll get a prize. He'll send you something fun. But all that was news to us. I mean, for me anyway.

nal Endowment for the Arts in: [1991](#)

And we did rallies, direct mail, curtain speeches. Pretty good organizing, I would say unprecedented, really. And really paved the way for arts and civics.

But we learned a few things that I don't think have been absorbed by the field.

ing I learned, Again, this is: [1991](#)

So right away you're confronted with the democratization of the arts in America, which I know, something you deeply care about. Who gets to be an artist or a maker, right?

In America, who gets to enjoy the arts, whether it's like this big time symphony or, or doing chalk work on the sidewalk, who gets to be creative in America, right? You could be a Mozart, but if there's no pianos in your community, it ain't gonna happen. It's just not gonna happen, okay?

And politically, the lesson is if you want the vote of the black legislator and there's no arts organizations in his or her district, there's no reason for them to vote for you.

The second thing that happened was we did curtain speeches all throughout Chicago's theaters on a weekend where the lights dimmed and the stage manager came out, said, ladies and gentlemen, if you want to keep the art, the lights on for theater in America. Sign the postcard in your program and leave it in the bin on the way out to save the nea. Thank you very much.

The audience turns and goes, what's the nea? Is that like the education? So we have failed, and I would put it to you, we have continued to fail to educate our base.

The people are sitting in our seats, coming to our spaces every day, every weekend for generations. The only thing we've asked them is to visit me. That's it.

They sit there, they look at programs, we're mailing them, physical mail, we're emailing them. It's all about visit me.

And the other side has done a much better job of activating their base and turning them into elected officials and carving a path to power, and we have not. So that's on us. So we're sitting here going, oh, woe is me. The NEA is cut, the National Endowment is cut. PBS is gone.

The Kennedy center is going to do Nazi line dancing or whatever. Too late. It's too late, my friends. The other side has been working on Power for 40 years and we haven't.

So those are the things I learned from that campaign way the hell back. So I ran around the country for years with a slideshow showing Jesse Helms like a caricature.

I had the direct mail pieces that they used to attack the arts that we would read from them. I mean, it was hateful speech.

Even to this day, 40 years later, it still makes my blood boil to read what these guys wrote about specific exhibits and specific artists. And of course they raised tens of millions of dollars with those data. Hateful mailers. And I was trying to get artists and arts leaders angry.

You should know this shit, right? We've forgotten it. I mean, go to the next conference of the arts, whatever that is, and just walk around and go, culture wars, anybody?

No one's gonna know what you're talking about. That's on us. That is no good. That is not okay. The places where we're learning our crafts have let us down. They haven't taught this at all.

n around the country. This is: [1992](#)

And it was like, what the.

I was like, because think about it, you're in your successful mid career arts gallery, person, singer, performer, director, whatever your thing is, and some guy is coming in front of you to say you should drop all that or put it aside what, and be what, a city councilman? I have no way to process that. It just seems like an outlandish request.

If you didn't learn about the First Amendment, your responsibility to the First Amendment, if you haven't been challenged. Yeah, I get it. And if you go to your conferences year after year after year and it isn't brought up again to challenge you as a leader, sure.

It's not going to make any sense. So that's what I did for a long time. I've done a.

A number of trainings here in Chicago for artists and creatives on how to run for local office, and they usually go very well. But it didn't scale up. So I'm trying it all again.

Bill Cleveland: [00:14:28](#)

does trying it again mean in: [2025](#)

Tom Tresser: [00:14:39](#)

It's called the 100K Project Bill. We got a bunch of people across the country trying to wave the flag one more time and basically ask our peers, are you a leader?

Let me sit on the people who are listening to this. Just ask yourself, are you a leader?

It's not for everybody, but I'm just saying I believe that the more creative people enter this work, the better our governments will be. I'm going to assert that when our peers enter public life, they're going to do a better job.

They're going to deliver better government, better solutions, better community to their voters, to their district. And I just, I believe that because I know of creative people who hold elected office, and that's what they tell me. So that's the theory here, if you.

Bill Cleveland: [00:15:27](#)

Will, the theory of change. Yes, I hear you.

You've had a long, long career of, I think, number one, studying and understanding the systems, governmental systems, social systems, community systems that make things happen or not in communities.

And not a lot of people have that kind of background and understanding, as you say, civics is supposed to teach us those things, at least at the rudimentary level.

But I think less and less these days, even the mechanics, even the dots that are obviously connected, like, as you say, public service, and all those things that are sort of assumed out there in the world. I call it the tyranny of comfort. And what I'm interested in hearing from your history book of experience.

Bill Cleveland: [00:16:34](#)

Are those.

Bill Cleveland: [00:16:34](#)

Places where you feel like what you have worked so hard for has manifested in a way where you say, wow, this is worth all this effort. This is the payoff.

Tom Tresser: [00:16:49](#)

I have a simple equation for civics, stupid people and evil leaders. So when you have both of those together, you have disaster. You have fascism, you have Nazis.

And part of my career has been about making people smart, giving them information. So it's old school education, old school investigation, but it's also popular education. People are experts in their own lives.

They just need a little something extra, like details about the city budget, which is a very particular example of civic information, which is often withheld and difficult to find. But if you make that information available and explain it to people, it's not like it's above their pay grade.

Even a budget as big as the city of Chicago, which, which is over \$20 billion, people can get it if you give them the tools to help them approach thinking about how public money is supposed to flow. So again, there's a, there's a big call for grassroots. Old school Frederick Douglass going from meeting to meeting for years to speech and preach.

Old school, the former slave. So what I'm talking to you is my lived experience. But he was a poet, bringing people to be abolitionists at the risk of his life.

You can't replace that. I mean, the Internet cannot replace that. Social media can't replace it.

So part of me is saying we got to get in front of the people and do some preaching and teaching like Mississippi Freedom School. Those are the kinds of meetings that I've run. Hundreds of them, hundreds of them. So that's the first part of the equation.

We got to lift ourselves up. And then about the evil leaders, we got to replace them. So that's the power piece. Paul Wellstone had a triangle.

His theory of engagement was a triangle in which you would do organizing and community work in one corner, like listening, explaining, teaching, old school organizing.

Senator Paul Wellstone: [00:18:45](#)

My friend Jim Hightower says, never, never, never buy a pit bull from a one armed man and never trust the conventional wisdom. And we didn't pay any attention to the conventional wisdom. We just had a great time. We had a twinkle in our eye.

And it didn't matter how much attack was just said over and over and over again. You say the same thing everywhere you have to. But I said, I said I am for environmental protection. I am for universal health care coverage.

I am opposed to privatizing Social Security. I am for expanding Medicare coverage. I am for good quality of health care in rural areas, not just in the cities. I am for living wage jobs.

I am for investing in children and education. I am a reformer. I want to get, get money out of politics. We didn't weave or bob on the issues.

We were there on the workaday majority issues, the kitchen table issues, the Democratic Party issues, and we won that race by 9 percentage points.

Tom Tresser: [00:19:59](#)

And then that would lead to advocacy and policy work. Leaders would emerge, and then on the third corner was running for office. But then you just keep going around the bend.

You hold the elected office, elected people accountable through more public meetings. You find more leaders, and you just never stop. The problem with nonprofits is we are forbidden from entering into elective politics.

You can do a lot as a nonprofit. You can hold candidate forums, you can do voter registration. You can even train people to run as a nonprofit. But they're so afraid. They're so scared.

As I say, addicted to powerlessness. So anyway, evil leaders must be replaced. Stupid people must be enlightened. And maybe stupid is too harsh a word, but that's my formulation.

And the biggest example for me in my life is the campaign to stop the Olympics from coming to Chicago.

Bill Cleveland: [00:20:54](#)

Part three, the Chicago Olympics. So could you talk about that? I mean, how in the world did an arts advocate, cultural organizer become involved.

Tom Tresser: [00:21:08](#)

In the Olympics in: [2007](#)

And there's a lot of theories about why he did that. I think it was to take the eye off all the scandals that were emblazoning his administration one after another.

But nevertheless, he directed the entire civic architecture of the city, the funders, the media, elected officials, of course, to secure the Games. And he put together a committee headed by a billionaire. And he would not brook any dissent. There was no public pushback at all.

And remember, Daley had been in office at that point 20 years. A very vindictive man. Our city council has 50 members, and if he would get a vote on a budget or some other matter of 47 to 3, he'd go after the 3.

And he didn't mess around. He never lost anything in his entire career.

There was nothing that Mayor Daley wanted that did not happen, and it was nothing that he didn't want that happened. Okay? Now he wants the Olympics. And Barack Obama, who was born, who's from Chicago, was our junior senator, was just elected president.

The most popular politician, I would say, on the planet, and all the odds makers and all the pundits said the Games are ours to lose. It's in the bag. And against all that, a group of unpaid volunteers got together and they were called no Games Chicago.

And we had no money, no love, no office. But we did the due diligence that you expect a body politic to undergo.

When you're taking on something as big as an Olympic bid, An Olympics is a city killer, Bill. It's a city killer. Kills your city. It shreds civil rights, destroys the environment, and bankrupts you. Aside from that, it's a fantastic idea.

It makes a few people a lot of money. Including the ioc, of course. And the IOC is the biggest brand on the planet.

There's no place on this planet, including the Himalayas to the Arctic Circle, that if you show those rings, everybody knows what they are. They're more popular than Coca Cola or the dollar sign.

So who are we to take on Mayor Daley, all the foundations, all the electeds, and even the media. The Chicago Tribune was owned by a billionaire named Sam Zell, and he gave the Olympic bid a million dollars. So here's your personal newspaper.

So you think anyone's going to be telling you the downside of the Olympics? Long story short, we outmaneuvered them. We out organized them.

We went to the headquarters of the IOC in Lausanne, Switzerland, and we did some amazing work. I'll just say that. That we won. And the story is published last year in this book, Shameless Plug, by Routledge Press. No Games Chicago.

citizens derailed the city's: [2016](#)

And we contrasted that to the lies that were being told by the. By the mayor and his people. And we just kept calling out those lies.

,: [2009](#)

ity as the city is denied the: [2016](#)

Bill Cleveland: [00:25:00](#)

So why do you think people believed.

Bill Cleveland: [00:25:03](#)

What you had to share? What was it about the way you communicated and your strategy for engaging the public?

Tom Tresser: [00:25:12](#)

Yeah, right. Well, we were just saying we're just doing the research that your elected officials should have done or the civic Federation.

I mean, we have big downtown nonprofits that make millions of dollars and they're supposed to watch our back. A little bit of research will reveal that the Olympics are terrible.

academic research was rife in: [2008](#)

Today, 15 years later, everyone from the Oxford School of Economics to just good journalists who have followed the blood trail here. So we're by saying we're just people like you who just want to know the truth? And here's what we've discovered. They are lying.

A few people are going to make a lot of money, and we're unpaid volunteers. Some people might have thought we worked for Brazil or something.

Bill Cleveland: [00:26:11](#)

So what I'm going to push back.

Bill Cleveland: [00:26:13](#)

I'm going to say lots of people can do the research.

And actually, we're living in a time when if someone even uses the word research, the assumption is that you made it up, whether you're right or left. Okay?

And so right now, there are people who are really struggling with trying to figure out how to communicate with everyday people in ways that they will listen and maybe possibly believe what you have to say. So I'm just going to say, what.

Bill Cleveland: [00:26:49](#)

Was it that you did over those many months?

Bill Cleveland: [00:26:53](#)

What strategies, what approach broke through and.

Bill Cleveland: [00:26:57](#)

You turned the tide?

Tom Tresser: [00:26:57](#)

Yeah, they were. They were. The Tribune.

o Tribune did a poll in early: [2009](#)

And the only reason why is because of our work. So what does credibility mean? So when you go into the community and you just stand there and say, I'm Tom. I'm an organizer for no Games Chicago.

Here's the research I've done. Let me share it with you. You're basically standing there naked. And people could go, you're full of shit. You just read it. You have to answer.

So where's your sources? We footnote everything. Our website was elaborate. I mean, it had papers and articles. So if you wanted to, you could fact check anything that we said.

So any flyer that we passed out that asserted overruns, real estate moguls make money, there was a footnote. If you wanted to, you could go to that article, wherever it was, and check us. But Chicago is the foggy town.

And so scandals started to be reported on. They couldn't avoid it. And it just. Every time one of those scandals came up, it sort of enhanced our credibility.

to Switzerland in mid June of: [2009](#)

I mean, we were interviewed by, like, Japanese papers and all kinds of people, like people from a host city, a potential host city, have never come to. To the IOC to say, no, thank you. And I remember giving a democracy lesson in front of the IOC's headquarters, where people were saying, who sent you?

I mean, there was suspicion. And so I had to give a democracy lesson in front of the IOC's headquarters to this world pressing in America. Nobody has to send you.

What do you think of that? We sent ourselves. And we're speaking for the people of Chicago more than the mayor or even our president on this matter.

So that sort of gets through too. Like, boy, these guys are gutsy. You're standing up to Daley, you're standing up to the president. And Oprah, by the way, she backed a bit too.

So you're standing up to all those people. Whoa. So Chicago likes to fight her too, by the way. So I think that helped us also.

Bill Cleveland: [00:29:22](#)

Part four, the Civic Gym so I.

Bill Cleveland: [00:29:25](#)

Believe that your work, the work of politics, and particularly the work that is embodied in the story that you just told, is in fact the work that originally brought you to Chicago, which is the same kind of work that William Shakespeare was involved in, which is, here's the story. Hopefully it'll be entertaining to you, but it might be meaningful to you.

And probably both of those things depend on whether it's approachable, it's feasible, it makes sense, it connects dots. And more than anything, I could feel a sense of myself in it.

I mean, a successful play is one that has touched the hearts of the people that are sitting in the audience. And everybody involved in theater knows that.

And they know when it's not happening, as you well know, when people's hearts have left the theater before their bodies, right? So in many ways, you created a counter narrative. And as you say, Chicago loves the underdog and they like fighters.

And against all odds, you went in there and won.

Bill Cleveland: [00:30:38](#)

But the thing is, we now live.

Bill Cleveland: [00:30:41](#)

In a world where people will lie and say, I put out the fire. And actually, no, you didn't. And I climbed that mountain. Actually, no, you didn't.

And your secret sauce was that there was an alignment between your story and what people were experiencing viscerally, because you were there in the summer, sweating in front of them, having a conversation over and over and over again.

And so to me, what you had was kind of a mechanistic, typically political power based juggernaut that was moving through your town and you met it with a cultural movement. I mean, there isn't anybody in Chicago that thinks that the government just speaks for them every time they open their mouth.

And so you stood up and said, this is another one of those moments, folks. It was a brand new news. And what you did was instead of just yelling, right, you actually said, there's.

Bill Cleveland: [00:31:49](#)

Something we can accomplish here.

Bill Cleveland: [00:31:51](#)

And by we, meaning you and me. Right. All of us in this room, whatever. And I think that's the essence of the work.

Tom Tresser: [00:32:03](#)

Well, interestingly, it caused me a lot of reflection. First of all, why did it fall upon a bunch of unfunded plucky volunteers? Where. Where was the civic architecture?

defunded immediately. But in: [2008](#)

I mean, honestly, there've been more discussion in Chicago about a dog. Bitch, should we have a dog? That's great. Montrose Avenue. And you have people coming out and they'll be yelling, ah, you hate dog. Big conversation.

So Civic Chicago failed, and they're likely to fail us again. What? I started with a critique of the nonprofit sector. What do we need them for?

o happen in Chicago since the: [1871](#)

Bill Cleveland: [00:33:03](#)

You're talking about about a vital missing link in civic infrastructure. But you're not a sit on your hands kind of guy. So how did you respond?

Tom Tresser: [00:33:15](#)

ned in Chicago's West Loop in: [2013](#)

I think it might have been the first such space for the civics in America. And we had 16 groups working there every day. Voter registration, violence against women, legal issues, health care.

All kinds of interesting groups, big and small, mixing together every day. We had a green screen studio, a terrestrial radio station, a machine shop, a kitchen, and obviously spaces to work and play.

And we had classes at night. Again, back to civic literacy. How do you get smart on civics? We got to teach it. So we had 80 workshops.

History of civic planning, history of labor relations in the city, how to run for office, how to start a community garden. All these things were taught by subject matter experts at the Civic Lab.

And I was thinking that should someone come down with another cockamamie plan like the Olympics, this could be a space where people could get together and they would have conference room and they would have some history. And if they needed a website, we could. You could build one for them really quickly. It would be a first responder space for civic emergencies.

Yeah, yeah. And sadly, I couldn't get it funded. I was there every day, Bill, for two years as the unpaid mayor of Civic Town, and I love the vibe.

It was some beautiful things happening there. But again, another big word of mine is architecture and infrastructure. That's what, again, the left lacks.

And I was hoping the civic lab would be duplicated across America. Ground level walk in storefront spaces where you would just walk in and learn shit and make shit. Like a civic gym.

Yeah, I've heard that term used before. We were a civic gym. That's what we needed. We needed thousands of those. You need someone watching the store, like, where's our public money going?

And who gets to vote on that? And if you don't like the way it's going, you better change it. You better get in there and take names and kick some ass.

You don't like the way things are going, you need to change. Yeah, your leaders.

Bill Cleveland: [00:35:17](#)

Otherwise, your current enterprise is to get more creative folks in a community to come out of the studio and into city hall or the school district building as elected leaders. So talk to me about what you think are the unique qualities that a creative community can bring to the civic community.

Tom Tresser: [00:35:49](#)

That is the number one question, isn't it? Because the voter. Honestly, Bill, don't care what you do. I mean, you're a plumber, you're an artist, you're a writer, you're a podcaster.

They want to know, how will you make my life better? You got to tell me your story, your resume, why I should give you my vote.

Because then you're going to be in the city hall or on the school board with that budget and with these serious decisions and your way of approaching problems, that's going to make my life better. That's what you have to convince me of. So part of the dialogue to our peers is, first of all, are you a leader? This is even appetizing to you.

I'm trying to get people excited about it. Yes. Do want to do this? Or as I say, put down your paintbrush and pick up the gavel?

Or, or another way to put it is just think of your campus as your community. Which is not a strange analogy to you, Bill, because that's your work.

Over the decades, you've explained this in many ways and forms, how that happens and why that is a powerful thing, a virtuous thing.

Bill Cleveland: [00:36:52](#)

Right. But how do you make the translation, you know, from creative process to political process or directing an ensemble theater to community organizing?

Tom Tresser: [00:37:04](#)

So we have our first eight week workshop coming up starting in early October. We're working with the National Guild for Community Arts Education.

Now to the question, what are the things that you do in your artistic practice that you take for granted? Think about that. And so for some people, yeah, I start with sketching. I do my research, and I do many, many versions. They can walk you through that.

And I say, okay, that's iteration. That's prototyping. Or sometimes in human centered design, we say, you're failing early, cheaply, and fast. Okay, so now how would that work in civics?

Or sometimes we find people saying, I have a lot of empathy as a creative person. I rely on that part of my personality. And then, of course, it's just an easy conversation to say, why do we need that in public life? We get more.

We get. I look at a pile of junk and I see a sculpture. How do you do that? Where is that?

What part of your brain are you using when you see shit that people have thrown away and you see something that is not there? And so, again, in the world of community organizing, we often talk about blurred vision.

You see the world as it is, but you also see the world as it ought to be. And this is common for all organizers. I don't care what they do. This is unjust. This is not good. But at the same time, I see a better world.

I put them on top of each other, and I work towards that vision. And that's all an artist does. I would put it to you.

They have a vision of something that's in their head, but then they marshal their skill and their resources, they get a push to get that pile of junk from the street, and they start using their skill and tools, and all of a sudden, there's a thing that wasn't there before, and sometimes you're very happy with it, and other times you go, oh, that's surprising. I didn't even see that coming. But I like it.

Bill Cleveland: [00:39:00](#)

Part five, why now? But your pitch has a real here and now sense of urgency to it.

I mean, you're saying this is a particularly critical moment for creatives to be considering these threshold questions and possibly making a radical shift in focus.

Tom Tresser: [00:39:22](#)

Right.

Bill Cleveland: [00:39:22](#)

Well, how is that landing?

Tom Tresser: [00:39:24](#)

If you have this conversation with a group of creative people and they'll say, so what does that have to do with anything? And I say, oh, because our communities face intractable problems.

They don't seem to be solvable through the old conventional ways of looking at things. But the artist, the creative person goes, when you tell me we've never done that before, we don't do that.

Here Bill goes, that I don't care about that. I'm gonna put one and one together and make seven. That's what I do. So people are saying, stay in your lane.

The creative person goes, I'll make my lane or I make the path by walking it. So all those things, when you flesh them out, people start nodding their heads and go, yeah, I see what you're talking about. I resonate with that.

And then second question, okay, so how is that good in civics? And that's part of the training that we're going to offer. We hope to demonstrate to all those attendees that they are leaders.

They are needed in public life desperately. They don't all have to run. You can also help someone run, do other things, but that this is not crazy talk.

Your community will be better off should you make this journey. And we'll also have some people joining us who are, who hold elective office and they will actually have some stories to tell.

I'm not just making this shit up.

Bill Cleveland: [00:40:38](#)

Well, first of all, I want to tip my hat to you for not pigeonholing the artist as a maker only, but also as a creative strategic partner, a role, I think that's hard for some social change organizers to embrace. And if you don't mind, I'd like to segue into an interesting story you may not be aware of that I think is relevant to what we're talking about here.

So a question. Are you familiar with a British artist working in the late 20th century named Barbara Steveny?

She ran something called Organization and imagination in the 60s and 70s and 80s. Okay, so I think of Barbara Steveny.

Bill Cleveland: [00:41:23](#)

As an OG creative change agent.

Bill Cleveland: [00:41:28](#)

She went around and looked at abandoned factories and massive redevelopment projects in London and then showed up at government offices and industrial boardrooms where decisions about these projects were being made. And she asked, shouldn't there be artists in here? Then she built something called the Artist Placement Group to test that idea.

Later she evolved it into organization and imagination, shifting from factories to social systems so that organizations, government and business became the studio. Oweni's core message was art doesn't just reflect society, it enters it, listens to it, and reshapes it.

So in practice, these artists weren't just hired guns making art in weird places.

They were co designers who joined projects in industrial redevelopment, harbor redesign, and educational reform with no predetermined outcome, just a space to notice, question, and engage. So the artists weren't simply working the projects.

They were embedded in thinking about how the organization doing the work imagines themselves and how they define success, how they educate, how they change. How. So Oweni stretched the studio into boardrooms and classrooms and governmental strategy meetings.

The work was one of the foundational experiments of socially engaged art.

Bill Cleveland: [00:43:05](#)

Yes.

Tom Tresser: [00:43:05](#)

I love this. You gotta send me the links on this one, brother. This is good stuff.

Bill Cleveland: [00:43:10](#)

Now, I'm not gonna tell you that every time they sat down with a bunch of engineers or elected officials or whatever, everybody said, oh, wow, the artist's here. Just join in. But they did a pretty good job of finding the artists and preparing them.

And they were smart and they were clever, and the artists understood that their job was not to make a thing, but to help the group make something happen that was aligned with the mission and the community existed.

Tom Tresser: [00:43:43](#)

Sounds like being an amateur, you're helping to animate or transform. And so there's a Harvard project. Zero has studio thinking, and we're using some of that pedagogy in our work.

But it's back to the central question that you asked, which we hope to start the journey of answering is how can we take our creative portfolio skills and our experiences and our beliefs on our passions, our practices, and translate them into democracy and prosperity and beauty?

So when the first crazy dancer wins her race and she does a press conference without words and she wins, then the dam will be broken and everybody's going to want to join our party. Yes. But until that time, I think we have a lot of explaining to do, mostly to our own people. Again.

So if you're a dean of an art school out there, hire me to teach arts and public policy at your class at your school, or let me give a lecture on the culture wars or something. You got to put this in front of your people, deans. That's part of what I'm selling here. And again, it's a theory.

I mean, we could get 50 people to come to our training, and every single one of them could run, and they could all fail. And then we got to be sitting here a year from now going, what happened? What did we learn? Maybe they got to go a second time. Maybe. Who knows?

But for sure, for sure, politics is not beanbag. But on the hand, a lot of our artist fellows and fellows have actually done things much more difficult.

Bill Cleveland: [00:45:23](#)

Absolutely.

Tom Tresser: [00:45:25](#)

They just haven't thought about it in quite that way.

Bill Cleveland: [00:45:28](#)

Yeah.

Bill Cleveland: [00:45:28](#)

And I mean, one of the.

Bill Cleveland: [00:45:31](#)

So I think one of the things.

Bill Cleveland: [00:45:34](#)

That happens when people get in a room with what I would call a scripted politician is a sense of constriction.

There's something in their heart that says I think that's what is happening in America is a lot of the things that they assumed were true are now being questioned. And so someone shows up that finds that they are comfortable doing what you're talking about.

And that's, I think one of the things about your training is you're saying, okay, we're going to give you a chance to find out if you're a player.

And it may be that your combination of skills and authenticity and creativity and your story will actually resonate with your, with your community members in ways that are surprising to you.

Tom Tresser: [00:46:27](#)

No doubt. And that's why we're going to have performance and actual creative work as a through line.

So we're going to, we're going to read the letters from the Christian Coalition that attacked the arts, and we're going to ask for an immediate creative response on whiteboards and the spoken word. But the end of this whole eight weeks will be four mini performances will break the attendees into four teams.

Each team will pick one person to be a candidate. That person will be running for mayor of whatever city she lives in. And the exercise will be, you must perform a one minute stump speech.

And we'll tell the audience. So if there's four teams, one audience will be pta, one audience will be business leaders, one audience might be farmers, four separate audiences.

You'll have the last, maybe hour of the last session or something to actually huddle, write your stump speech. Which means I'm actually running for mayor of my town here in California. So you got to reference real stuff and your real experience.

The rest of your team will help you and they will also create visuals and a fight song. All that has, all that has to happen and then fantastic. And everybody will then get, get five minutes to perform.

So we'll have live valedictory performances, if you will, mini rallies. And I've done this in the past and I can tell you it's inspiring and you can actually learn something.

I mean, if you could actually be a candidate and take notes and go, I can run on that shit. That's how good it is. And then the last thing we're going to ask our attendees, okay, who's ready to throw their hat in the ring or help someone run?

Because we need obviously campaign managers, campaign workers, field workers. And if that's not for you, then just, will you bank your talent? Will you donate to one of our candidates or something like that?

Americans for the Arts. You should have been doing this for the last 40 years. All this should be in place by now.

There should Be a list on a website where you can just find out how many people from the arts or nurses or librarians or hold office. Where are they? Who are they? I should be able to look at them and engage with them. And their story should already be online.

We'll find them eventually. We'll create a hub for our candidates and for our people where they can interact with each other, share best practices.

And eventually we'll have a 501C4. We'll mentor you.

We're going to be asking the more seasoned politicians who hold office or have held office, who are from our world, would you take a call for an hour every other week from one of our guys and hold their hand? The thing is, the other side has done all this. The other side has all this in architecture, in place.

And it has made it easier for those people to enter in that. That frame and climb that hill. And you know what I call the ladder of participation? Climb that ladder. And we haven't. So we're gonna try.

We're going to try. Also. Another thing. If you happen to be a funder and you're on this call, we need \$10 million.

Bill Cleveland: [00:49:31](#)

There you go.

Bill Cleveland: [00:49:32](#)

I expect you'll be getting calls from a major funder any minute now. So thank you, Tom, for your persistence, your hard work, and the eternally more than half full glass you're drinking from.

It's been great to hear about your work and.

Bill Cleveland: [00:49:50](#)

And your stories.

Tom Tresser: [00:49:52](#)

Back at you, brother. Stay sane and stay safe out there.

Bill Cleveland: [00:49:56](#)

I will. Okay, that's a good idea.

Bill Cleveland: [00:49:59](#)

Okay, so before we sign off, here are a few things that have risen up for me from today's conversation. First, civic power is creative power.

The same inspiration we bring to art and story making can be a tool for shaping policy, reimagining justice, and designing more human systems. Next, I think we all know that silence is complicity. When we choose not to speak or act, we leave room for injustice to become the norm.

Community art, like democracy, only works when people's stories and fingerprints are all over it. Finally, we can design better systems. Democracy is not done. It's a living, breathing thing.

And like any creative process, it needs people who care enough to imagine what's.

Bill Cleveland: [00:50:56](#)

Next and then help build it. So bring on the shovels and the.

Bill Cleveland: [00:51:00](#)

Canvas and the drums. Art is Change is a production of.

Bill Cleveland: [00:51:06](#)

The center for the Study of Art and Community.

Bill Cleveland: [00:51:08](#)

Our theme and soundscape spread brings forth from the head, heart and hand of the maestro Judy Munson. Our text editing is by Andre Nebe. Our effects come from freesound.org and our inspiration comes from the ever present spirit of OOC235.

So until next time, stay well, do good and spread the good word. Once again, please know this episode has been 100% human.

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