

The Role of the Arts in a Time of Crisis¹

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Good afternoon. Thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of this extraordinary event. Before I begin, I want to take a moment to pay tribute to Diana Taylor. Her bold imagination brought to life the idea of an intellectual collective, unbound by space and time. Her tenacious leadership has sustained the Hemispheric Institute for the past six years. I know you join me in extending heartfelt thanks to Diana and her staff for all of their good work. Thanks also to the Federal University of Minas Gerais for hosting us. A special thanks to Leda Martins who directs the Hemispheric Institute here and to your visionary President Ana Lucia Almeida Gazzola. I am honored to be here on this my first opportunity to visit Brazil.

My topic this afternoon is the role of the arts in a time of crisis.

¹ Portions of this paper appeared in a November 10, 1998 lecture on Art and Human Rights delivered at George Mason University and in a lecture, "The Role of the Arts in a Time of Crisis," delivered on June 5, 2004 at Swarthmore College.

I chose this topic because I believe that my own country is in a state of crisis and, as the dean of a school of the arts, I believe that, given the nature of this crisis, there is a role which only artists and intellectuals can play.

First, a word about the nature of the crisis. Make no mistake; there is no physical threat: no genocide, no civil war, no occupation by hostile forces—in the United States at least. This is not a crisis having to do with kidnappings, abductions or disappearances. Nonetheless, the crisis is real. The origins reach back at least to the Reagan administration, when the United States began its inexorable tilt to the political right. With the triumphs of the civil rights era behind us, the possibility of cultural reconciliation in my country had become remote. Indeed, by the late 1980's our divisions and differences erupted into the now famous culture wars.

During these culture wars, artists, as represented by some members of congress, were the symbol of what was wrong with America. Senators and congressmen outdid each other on the floor of the senate and in the house with their performances of righteous indignation against the anti-authoritarian, provocative, instigations of certain individual artists whose work represented the antithesis of a conservative right wing ideology. Around these displays of outrage, there coalesced vocal, well-organized right wing religious groups who provided political capital to these elected officials. Our side—the left wing liberals—made surprisingly little fuss. We seemed curiously unable to frame the debate in a way that connected with a public beyond the world of art and culture. Trained communicators, we failed as public intellectuals. As a result, public funds for individual artists were discontinued; the infrastructure of public support for art and culture slowly collapsed; institutions which dared present or exhibit work that dissatisfied conservative ideology were threatened with a loss of public support. The stage was set for muting voices of dissent.

The events of September 11th accelerated this muting of dissent and debate. The single most troubling action taken by our government after the attacks was the passage of the Patriot Act. The Patriot Act radically expands government authority to conduct surveillance of its citizens and gain access to records of their lives from a range of institutions. The records of libraries, universities, doctor's offices, internet providers, bookstores, travel agencies—the places where we leave records of our lives-- are among those open to scrutiny. American foundations, traditionally one of the sources of financial support that feeds independent projects and innovation in our culture, are by no means exempt from our government's increased surveillance. Failure to abide by the requirements of Homeland security could risk a suit of their assets by the United States government. My guess is that it is just a matter of time, before this results in a more cautious conservative agenda on the part of foundations.

In the sciences the tilt to the right has had an insidious impact on freedom of inquiry and scientific objectivity. Last year a group of 60 scientists, including Nobel Laureates, medical experts, former agency heads and several college presidents wrote to President Bush protesting the way in which research funds were awarded according to conservative political ideology rather than rational decision making. One former government agent observed that policy decisions are now made not on what will happen but what certain ideologues want to happen. Noting the reliance on freedom of inquiry and objectivity in the pursuit of scientific research, they wrote: "...this administration has obstructed that freedom and distorted that objectivity in ways that were unheard of in any previous administration."²

Add fear to the narrowing of civil liberties and the muting of dissent and you have given the public a rationale for giving up their rights and privileges. Fear—constant red alerts, fear of further attacks, election tactics that preyed on that

² Dr. Neal Lane, former director of the National Science Foundation and former presidential advisor, is quoted in the web-site article "Preeminent Scientists Protest Bush administration's Misuse of Science," the Union of Concerned Scientists: <http://www.ucusa.org/news/press-release>

fear—clearly convinced the majority of voters in the United States' last presidential election that we need more not less security and protective interventions. Our current administration believes that now it has what amounts to a national consensus legitimizing its current tactics.

Suppression of rights in the United States is not new. At the end of the 18th century there was the Alien and Sedition Acts; Lincoln's suspension of the writ of habeas corpus during the Civil War; Jim Crow laws in the 20th century; and during World War II the internment of Japanese Americans—to name just a few examples.³ As noted in the book *The War on our Freedoms: Civil Liberties in an Age of Terrorism*: "In each generation America...witnesses a tug of war between the instinct to suppress and the instinct for openness. Today, with the perception of a mortal threat from terrorists, the instinct to suppress is in the ascendancy...The war on our freedoms is just as real as the war on terror and, in the end just as dangerous."⁴

Most recently, large corporations and the right wing press have become eager partners with the government in following the instinct to suppress. One notorious example of a failed effort was the Disney Corporation's manipulations to keep Fahrenheit 9/11 out of the market. Another documentary, however, shown as part of the Sundance Film Festival this January, which critiqued the American presence in Iraq brought a storm of criticism by Fox Five against Sundance, its director and its founder, Robert Redford for showing something critical of American foreign policy. Unpatriotic was the charge. And who can forget Sponge Bob Square Pants' indiscretion for which he was also publicly berated by the right wing media. On a serious note, the constant harangues against PBS, ultimately led to the resignation of its CEO and some predict that it is only a matter of time, before that institution bites the dust.

³ Many thanks to my husband, Dr. George Campbell, Jr. who cited these historical incidents in his commencement speech to the graduates at Cooper Union, May 27, 2004.

⁴ *The War on our Freedoms*, edited by Richard Leone and Greg Anrig, Jr. New York: Public Affairs Press; the Century Foundation, 1st edition, 2003.

We are a money culture and money, too, has played a critical role in dividing and silencing us. One egregious example is what has happened to our public school system. Education, by almost every measure, is one of the best guarantees of social mobility in our culture. Yet, less and less money, particularly for urban, inner city schools has left public schools crumbling. Students who go to them often find themselves unable to compete academically for places in our most elite colleges and universities. When I first came to the Tisch School of the Arts, I wondered why more students of color were not admitted. One of the things we found is that students from the most disadvantaged high schools almost never completed our rather complicated admissions process because, for the most part, many of them received virtually no counseling or guidance in these schools where a single guidance counselor might have literally hundreds of students.

Meanwhile the cost of our most elite colleges and universities is spiraling out of control. A recent article in *The New York Review of Books*, suggested that we are rapidly moving in the direction where we will have returned to the 19th century, when college was only for the very rich. National statistics support this observation. Even though the richest colleges in our country are need blind, that is if you are accepted, they award scholarships to cover need (my own university does not do that), national statistics tell us that 25% of the top performers academically in our high schools do not even bother to apply to college. Families in the top 25% economically are 13 times more likely to send their children to college than families who are in the bottom 25% economically. What has been our national response? Federal and state subsidies to higher education have dropped precipitously and prisons, in most state budgets, which used to be the lowest priority, have replaced education as the # 1 budget priority, driving education, in most states, to the bottom of the list.

Our retreat as a country from the support of art and culture is no different. Once upon a time in our country, artists and scholars were celebrated as essential to

the idea of a democracy. National endowments were established by our congress to support the work of individuals and organizations. Language used in the endowments' enabling legislation in 1965 was positively lofty. "Democracy demands wisdom and vision from its citizens."⁵ The year 1965 was also the year of the civil rights act, also the year of the founding of NYU's school of the arts. The school's mission, to be "a daring adventure," resonated with the sense of excitement of the era. Every time I read that mission I am reminded of the responsibility and promise we bring forth from that historical moment.

So there is a crisis in my country. But, what, you may ask, does this have to do with the arts? If there is an issue of civil liberties, call the lawyers; get the ACLU to sue. If the press is misbehaving, alert the journalists in the journalism department. If there is a problem with politics, round up the activists and tell them to protest and boycott. We scholars and artists have our own problems. There are plays to mount, careers to launch, films that must go into post production, books to write and publish. In any case, we could not even rescue the dissipation of our National Endowments for the Humanities and the Arts. How can we be asked to rescue our country?

I suppose we should all be mindful of words from a passage of a play by the Irish poet, Seamus Heaney. The play, an adaptation of Sophocles' 5th century, play Philoctetes, is *The Cure at Troy*. Towards the end, the chorus laments:

*Human beings suffer
They torture one another
They get hurt and get hard
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong*

⁵ Quoted from the National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act of 1965 (Public law 89-209).

*Inflicted and endured*⁶

None of us is naïve enough to believe that “a poem or play or song” can cure anything.

Yet I worry. I worry that in my country we have lost a sense of the potency of what we do as artists and intellectuals. I worry that the university is one of the few remaining spaces in our country where we can have real debate and dissent without fear of reprisal and revenge. I worry that we use the privilege of this protected space to consider the condition of the world around us and the relation of our work as artists and scholars to that world. I worry that as a school of the arts, we are very good at teaching craft, production values, the vocabularies of our specialties. But are there other lessons our students need to learn? Far be it from any of us to prescribe the type of artist or scholar anyone should become but at the very least, as educators, particularly as we experience the tilt, the loss of balance, before we spiral into a place from which we cannot regain our balance, we have a responsibility to present the full range of how art engages the world.

Looking at the 20th century alone, a partial list is instructive.

Czechoslovakia

Vaclav Havel and his colleagues led an underground theater in Prague, after the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia. Their plays often satirized the absurdities of communist bureaucracy and fueled an ongoing resistance to the Soviet Occupation. Havel has written eloquently about his expectations for theater. Theater, in his words, should be “a living spiritual and intellectual focus, a place for social self-awareness...a space, an area of freedom, an instrument of

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: a version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 77.

human liberation.” In 1989, after the fall of the Soviet Union, as we all know, Havel was elected president of the new Czech Republic.

South Africa

Athol Fugard, John Kani, Mbongeni Ngema and others mounted plays at the Market Theater in Johannesburg and the Place Theater in Cape Town during the era of Apartheid in South Africa. Defying the strict separation of the races under apartheid, these productions boasted multi-racial casts, collaborative authorships, multi-racial audiences who in defiance of South African law, came to see plays that exposed the cruelties and contradiction of apartheid as well as the complicity of big business world wide.

Both the plays of Havel—thanks, in part, to the efforts of the late Joe Papp at the Public Theater—and the plays of Fugard, Kani and Ngema—thanks, in part, to the efforts of Lloyd Richards at Yale—made their way to American and European stages, giving full articulation to issues world wide while those same issues were suppressed locally and forced underground. Satire, theater of the absurd even the form of the classical Broadway musical in a work like *Sarafina!* brought the issues in those countries to life and helped to create a worldwide resistance movement which, for both countries, grew over time. It has been interesting to watch as the artists and intellectuals in these countries have re-calibrated their work as the circumstances have changed in their countries.

Even when there was no triumphal ending, the arts have played a critical role in terms of conscience, moral critique and collective action.

Kenya

Ngugi Wa Thiongo, the Kenyan playwright, poet, novelist and essayist led a literacy effort in a small Kenyan village in the mid-1970's. Although illiteracy was over 80% when he started, typical for a small rural village at that time, he was able to organize among the villagers a movement to build a theater and, with

him, to co-write in Kikuyu, their language, plays which were probing critiques of current social and political practices. Their first effort, one of Ngugi's most important works, *I will Marry When I Want* was closed by the Kenyan authorities after nine performances of standing room only audiences. A few years later, another play *Mother Sing For Me* so infuriated the authorities that they razed the theater altogether and jailed Ngugi. Though the playwright eventually had to leave his homeland, the response of the Kenyan authorities attest to their recognition of the extraordinary potency of the artistic work and the capacity of the arts to inspire the imagination to imagine unimaginable possibilities.

What all of these artists understood was that the work of art commands attention, makes us divert our time and energy away from our day to day lives and enter into the force field constructed by the work of art. Having experienced an authentic work of art, we leave the experience seeing the world differently. We know the world in a more profound manner. Protesting and boycotting does not change us in quite the same way. In an article in *The Guardian* a few years ago, the British artist, Jeannette Winterson observed about the power of art the following:

Art can offer no obvious return, its rate of exchange is energy for energy, intensity for intensity. The time you spend on art is the time it spends with you; there are no shortcuts, no crash courses, no fast tracks. ...what art can do is prompt in us authentic desire. By that I mean it can waken us to truths about ourselves and our lives; truths that normally lie suffocated under the pressure of the 24 hour emergency zone called real life. Art can bring us back to consciousness, sometimes quiet, sometimes dramatically....⁷

In Czechoslovakia, South Africa and Kenya, not only did the work "waken...truths," the institution of the theater itself provided the framework for collective action. Audiences were not only spectators but in the case of Ngugi

⁷ Jeannette Winterson, "The Secret Life of Us," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2004.

they were collaborators and co-conspirators in the building of the theater itself and in the case of all of three countries, the choice of attending, was an action, an act of defiance. Sometimes, even when the work of art fails to find its audience, the fact of its making and its existence plays a role in a time of crisis.

Chile

Two years before Ngugi began his work in Kenya, in Chile, Patricio Guzman discovered that the portability of the then new video cameras gave him extraordinary mobility as he set out to document what he thought would only be a hotly contested congressional election in March of 1973. Though Salvador Allende's left wing Popular Front prevailed in those elections, the United States supported Christian Democratic Party continued to challenge the legitimacy of the sitting president. Using the new camcorder with synchronized sound, Guzman used his mobility to interview individuals as they stopped for a light; he follows members of parliament into session; he goes in the headquarters where elections result are tallied; he captures spontaneous riots and street protest; he attends labor union meetings. His camera is ubiquitous, giving equal time to the Christian Democrats and the Popular Front, though he is an unabashed supporter of Allende. Ultimately he films the bombing of La Moneda, the presidential headquarters with Allende inside and the ascendancy of one of the leaders of the coup, General Pinochet. Guzman was exiled from Chile and finished his film in Cuba. For the next 17 years, Pinochet attempted to invent a narrative of legitimacy. Meanwhile, *The Battle of Chile*, banned from the country, remains a narrative of authentic memory.

United States

In my country, the rise of hip hop in the South Bronx came in response to the crisis of hopelessness in the inner city. In the 1970's, "permanent underclass" was the epithet the conservative American press and conservative intellectuals were using to describe people living in the inner city in urban areas that had grown impoverished and ruinous. The word "permanent" conveyed emphatically

the sense that those of us who lived and worked in those ruined neighborhoods belonged to a caste, a status in the culture from which there was no way out. Nonetheless, out of the most deteriorated areas in our country emerged not only a new art form, a new way of making music -- scratching and sampling -- but scathing social and political commentary.

Many of these young artists later became successful entrepreneurs finding ways to connect with their audiences and distribute their work that allowed them to bypass conventional structures. Later, as we know, many also became co-opted and seduced by the money culture and there were permutations of hip hop that were deeply problematic. Violence, misogyny, the glorification of the gangster life are not my cup of tea. Whatever we may think of hip hop culture, however, whatever distorted image of itself it has become, in its earliest manifestations, the generative force, its impact on youth culture worldwide, is undeniable. As for the South Bronx, once given up as forever lost, has long since been rebuilt.

Harlem

My own experience in Harlem in the 70's, also a ruined community in those days, suggests the institutional potency of the arts. I had the privilege of joining a small army of artists and activists who started out in lofts, converted garages and church basements up in northern Manhattan and over time built world class cultural institutions that were the lynchpin for the slow transformation of this inner city community.

At the Studio Museum in Harlem where I was the executive director for 10 years, the almost complete absence of Black artists from the history of American art compelled the museum to organize defining exhibitions, build a permanent collection, and create a literature around these artists. Catalogue publications published by the museum provided some of the earliest literature on the visual culture of diasporic Africans in North America. Equally as important as the content of the museum's exhibitions and collections was the physical

assertiveness of its space. Designed by the black architect Max Bond, the space established a beachhead of physical clarity and beauty amidst the ruined buildings of 125th Street. Inside, symposia and lectures provided a place for public discourse on issues of critical importance to the Harlem community. As a young scholar, I felt that my work was important not only to me or to a community of scholars but to a larger audience who needed to see themselves affirmed by the institutional presence of the place.

But that was thirty years ago. What about now? In my own school a group of faculty and I working independently of each other came to the same conclusion several years ago. We needed a space, not necessarily a physical space but an intellectual and artistic space within our school. We thought of it as a front porch so to speak that opened out onto the world so that we could consider these issues of how we engage with the world. Lorie Novak, photographer and chair of the department of Photography and Imaging and Jan Cohen-Cruz a scholar of community based theater, both of whom had considerable experience in constructing opportunities for their students to work collaboratively with a range of communities in New York, were the galvanizing force on the faculty. Their work directed their students to think about communities outside of the academy and, in some cases, such as Jan Cohen-Cruz' community gardens project, to work collaboratively with the community to author and perform a theater piece.

Both Lorie Novak and Jan Cohen-Cruz partnered with the Tisch School administration, to create a new intervention within our school called the Department of Art and Public Policy, and the Center for Art and Public Policy. The department awards no degrees, has no boundaries so that faculty who want to teach from all over the school can participate. Graduate as well as undergraduate students take courses. Though there are only a few full time faculty in the department, there is also an advisory group of faculty from around the school who vet proposals for courses. The department, however, does have a mandatory set of writing courses for all Tisch School of the Arts freshmen.

Entitled “Art in the World,” the writing courses are at the core of what art and public policy is about. The goal is to teach our students to look closely at the world around them, consider it from multiple often contradictory perspectives, form ideas, bring evidence to bear on those ideas, do careful readings of authors who have thought deeply about the arts. As one of my students explained to me, we are teaching a way of thinking that as it observes the world closely, is assertive and defiant, and informed. In addition to the core courses, there is a suite of courses that engage students to think about the conditions under which they make art, how they connect with their audience, the historical circumstances that have impacted the way artists engage the world. Perhaps, when the time comes, our students will do a better job than their elders in framing a debate around the arts that connects to a broader public outside of the cultural community. They will be the ones who construct the models for making art that will waken us to our truths, make a way out of no way, correct the tilt and bring us back into balance.

Or at least I believe they will. As an educator, I am an idealist. I need to see possibility in the face of every student who sits in front of me.

In closing, I return to the song of the chorus in *The Cure at Troy*. The play was produced in 1990 in County Derry, Northern Ireland. Dramatizing the clash between private vengeance and public responsibility, the play stood as a parable for Ireland’s seemingly irreconcilable divisions. After issuing their warning about what a play, a poem or a song, can or cannot do, the chorus concludes with words of hope and possibility.

*History says, don’t hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave*

*Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*

*So, hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.⁸*

*Call miracle self-healing
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightening and storm
And a god speaks from the sky*

*That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.*

⁸ Ibid., p. 77.