

Art, Dialogue, and Activism

ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

SESSION DESCRIPTION: How do we effect change through our work? Where and how do art and dialogue fit into social change activism and movement building? A conversation among activist artists and community organizers will examine a range of approaches for connecting arts, dialogue, and activism. To stimulate a full group discussion about strategies and challenges, presenters will discuss the dynamics of partnerships between artists and organizers, the development of community ownership and decision making, the transformative power of image, story, and metaphor, and the connection between individual and systemic change. They will also explore the tensions that may arise when an activist's need for outcome clashes with an artist's creative process or when the point of view, advocacy orientation, and power analysis of an activist campaign runs up against the multiple perspectives and open ended nature of dialogue.

PRESENTERS: *Grace Lee Boggs, The Boggs Center; Sonya Childress, Active Voice; Curtis Muhammad, Junebug Productions; Isao Fujimoto, University of California, Davis and Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship; Graciela Sanchez, Esperanza Peace and Justice Center; Geno Rodriguez, Alternative Museum, John Malped, Los Angeles Poverty Department*

FACILITATOR: *David Campt, dialogue and diversity consultant*

David Campt began the session by asking the presenters how their programs work and how they try to link art, dialogue, and activism. Campt expressed his hope for an invigorating discussion that explored the tensions and synergies between art, dialogue, and activism.

INTRODUCTIONS

John Malpede, Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD): I work on skid row in L.A.—a socially contrived area, a containment area—with many social services based there. My work originated from the Inner City Law Center, researching homelessness; then went to activism, to reform the social service system. Eventually I entered nonprofit hell, due to unlikely success. Now I'm working around drug policy issues. I recently did a show that recreates a hearing of the U.S. Congress committee on whether the CIA imported crack to fund the Contra war. For another project, *Is there History on Skid Row?*, we held policy discussions during performance—profane, spiritual, political. It was cool. As they are now a rising number of women and children on Skid Row, I am currently working with women's organizations that address these issues.

Graciela Sanchez, Esperanza Center for Peace & Justice: San Antonio has five military bases, five missions from 17th century colonization, and a history of cultural genocide. The people who created the Esperanza Center are survivors of that cultural genocide, but want to live there fully, not as zombies. We're there long term, with our mothers and grandmothers. There's a community commitment to live the values that undermine the culture of violence and greed. We want to nurture culture: We've been cut off from the cultural values of community, of living with one another, respecting elders, working together—youth and elders. We want to live with dignity. Because as women of color, lesbians of color, we have nothing but our dignity. When they smash us, we can still stand up. What is that culture? Who are we? As we are grounded in our culture, it is as resistance to the corporate culture of violence.

(Graciela screened a video about La Gloria, a historic site of community importance that was destroyed by the city, narrated by the poetry of Esperanza member Vicki Grise. Sanchez explained that dance and live performance accompanied the piece, that it came about organically.)

Curtis Muhammad, Color Line Project: W.E.B. DuBois: "The problem of the 20th century will be the problem of the color line." We come out of the civil rights movement. We valued that period. We figured out that Story is the most valuable asset of oppressed people. Stories are diamonds we have to mine. There's a cry from the people for the lack of those stories; nobody knew the thousands of people involved. We're committed to rejuvenating and contributing to the movement for justice. What do we have to lift up and contribute? How do we re-awaken drive in people? We looked at the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in Mississippi, organizations that already existed. Organizers worked with them and took their stories to build the movement. We decided to do that again—theatre, schools, organizers. Make sure artists, educators, and activist/organizers are in circle. Artists learned

how to take stories and make art first. Then educators learned how to make curriculum, how to use Story Circles in the classroom. Taking root this year are activist/organizers organizing community using stories. Story circles are about democracy, equality. A circle is equalizing. Those successful movements were bottom-up. They reached for the voices of the voiceless. We had to demand change to get change.

Geno Roderiguez, Alternative Museum: I was with the Institute of Contemporary Hispanic Arts and En Foco. The Alternative Museum is also an alternative to ethnic-specific and race-specific museums that often have been just as exclusionary as the mainstream. It is a gateway to equality. We exhibit all artists based on the quality of their work. We need to look at political agendas; it's important to have institutions that preserve our histories. But we're in the global community now, and so we need to engage internationally. Barrio people and others need to see what's happening in China, etc. We're not people of the ghetto anymore; we're people of the world. We closed the [physical] museum two years ago as it became a boring exercise in entertaining people who were already convinced of our issues. Now we're virtual: we have 15 exhibits, and discussion from Mexico, Nigeria, Russia. We offer feedback, getting each other's messages across. When we define what we want to talk about, and who we want to talk to, then we have to figure out how to reach them—with aggressive but clever presentation, slipping politics in. Our current exhibition is *The Human Condition*, photographic exhibits on human rights nationwide.

Isao Fujimoto, Central Valley Partnership for Citizenship:

A man goes to a hardware store complaining that it takes him a whole week to cut a stack of wood. The salesman sells him a chainsaw, promising that he'll be able to cut ten times the amount of wood in the same period of time. The man goes home, and tries and tries, but doesn't finish his work any faster. In fact, it takes much longer, and much more work! He goes back to the hardware store, and complains that now it takes him a whole month to cut a stack of wood. The salesman doesn't understand, and asks to check the chainsaw. He pulls the chord, and the man says, "What's that sound?"

The Central valley has tremendous poverty. We encourage civic participation. We get people involved in community—learning language, becoming citizens, running for office. We support 225 projects, 40 of which are performance and art. We preserve the culture: an excuse to bring people together to share culture. The Tamejavi Festival tapped national groups. We have to see the whole country as resources, potential partners. There's all this latent energy out there. Our job is to pull that chord!

Comment: How are you financing this work?

Isao: The Irvine Foundation has funded us for seven years. Peace Church Movement and Industrial Areas Partnership have come together for this partnership. Foundations are not supporting operating budgets.

Sonya Childress, Active Voice: (Isao's my hero!) The power of stories to move people to action, empathetic debate, humanized policy debate. Active Voice works with talented producers, and helps producers understand what can happen with communities who use their videos. The founder was at POV for 12 years, but didn't know what discussion was happening around it. The founder left and we pulled films together around race and identity, helping PBS stations use films for dialogue and community. We started Active Voice out of the race initiative. We do social issue documentaries, mostly now around immigration and changing demographics. Communities are looking for tools to help with dialogue on how to support change. *The New Americans* is a seven-hour piece scheduled to go on PBS in March 2004. Its intention is to help you understand who these immigrants are, why they are leaving their homes, and why they come into your neighborhood. The series followed families—from the West Bank, India, Nigeria, etc.—for one year before leaving and two years after they arrived in the U.S. We want to engage people who feel threatened by new immigrants. Stories are emotional, accessible. It's not user friendly, for policy debates, etc., because of length. We are now re-editing it into shorter versions, finding the emotionally powerful scenes, for use by different constituencies: teachers in classrooms with new populations they're not familiar with, for example.

(Sonya then showed a clip from one of the many stories in *The New Americans*.)

Grace: How do we get the films, Sonya?

Sonya: We're beta-testing the videos and guides right now. We would love to get your feedback. Please let me know if you want to screen the video. My e-mail is sonya@activevoice.net.

KNOWING HISTORY, BUILDING A MOVEMENT

Curtis: Stories take over. There was a great migration of plantation workers to plants north. People sent their children back south to school. They went to get a hamburger, and couldn't. They started sitting in at cafeterias. Ella Baker called them together and formed SNCC. Ella said: Let's create a space to let people start talking to each other. We didn't call each other here; this was brought together externally (by Animating Democracy). How do we call ourselves together in future?

Mat Schwarzman, NPN: There are untold stories behind this weekend. Who remembers the Alliance for Cultural Democracy 20 years ago? It was a shoestring operation, with marginal employment. Now we're all older, stable. Many people don't know the history.

Graciela: My movement didn't start in the 60s. Mine goes back thousands of years. Women and queer people were excluded in the 60s. Esperanza is directed by women and queer people. Are we organizers? Artists? I'm all of those things. Am I Latina, lesbian, working class? I'm all those things. I don't have the luxury of dividing them. I am out as a theorist, activist, lesbian. Not in the academy, from my mother. People who really hear her are woman-identified. Male identified: oh, she's cute. My mother's not cute, she's *brilliant!* I went to Ms Foundation, and they asked: Who taught you organizing principles? Alinsky? No, not male and white. How will *The New Americans* be used? We'll see the values of love and respect and Laos immigrants. Will the values of these new immigrants survive? New immigrants have a better sense of themselves than I do. They're willing to put their lives on the line. But what are they going to learn when they "make it"? Is it about money? Or about how we take care of each other?

Geno Roderiguez: It's important when we find our voices, that we project them. We must have total control of how we project those voices. There's a lot of brilliant thinking in our people today, that aren't stories yet have to be projected. We publish catalogues of our own design. Noam Chomsky and Edward Said were invited. It's important to see who speaks our language and how we empower ourselves to create dialogues. Exhibitions regarding manufacturing consent; occupation, and resistance. We have the power, if we want, to get the information out. We need to put all the stories together and create electronic catalogues of out-of-print materials. We need to know our history (example: Art Workers Coalition).

Grace Lee Boggs: It is crucially important not only to know the past but to know how people are applying the lessons of the past to the challenges of today. Resistance needs to be creative, productive. "Freedom schooling, then and now." The movement is building. People see someone else doing something and say, I can do that too. We could follow the Move On model to network ourselves and learn from each other.

YOUTH—CONNECTING TO THE PAST AND THE FUTURE

Roberta Uno, Ford Foundation: There isn't only a disconnect from the past, there's a disconnect with the future, too. I wouldn't come to this convening if the young folks doing the work couldn't come. We need to learn from what they're doing, as well as them learning from us about the past. Hip Hop activism—they talk about being the new civil rights movement. Culture is such a big part of the movement—fighting the prison industrial complex, education reform. How are they organizing? A real wake-up moment for me was when Clyde Ballentine, producer of the NY Hip-Hop Theatre Festival said, after hearing older producers talking, "NEA, NRA—we don't know the difference. They weren't here for us."

Wayne Winborne: This is the struggle of our times. There may be more activism today than there was in the 60s. Young people don't care about that past. We think movement is going to look like it did in the 60s. But it's not going to now. Things are much more complicated now; we don't have obvious wrongs. A lot of things have gotten a lot better. People have a hard time getting their arms around what the issues are. Gender and sexual orientation are major issues right now but Black churches won't touch them. Black churches were central to organizing during the Civil Rights movement. We have the opportunity now to build much better multi-issue, multi-racial coalitions. We have to get Black churches to embrace gender and sexual orientation organizing. Here I am, a person of color, in the white power structure. You, too, Roberta. What are we going to do now?

Michael Marinez, Esperanza Center: These discussions have been going on for 500 years in my community. In the 70s, institutions became about money. There are people doing this work all over the country—you have to know them. This is not an invisible movement. But we don't acknowledge that it's there. These are groups who do not have access to this room. Youth Culture—the 1980s put our children in a tube. The only way they could get out of that tube was to kill their elders. We can't just take young people, their demographic, stick them on our boards, and ask them how they're going to change the world—not without knowing their ancestors. Elderly women, who took 11 years to march, are different from smelly young white kids who attack Frito Lay trucks and put brown children at risk.

MJ Donoghue, Hip-Hop artist with New World Theatre: One of the major divides between the Hip Hop generation and civil rights generation is the portrayal of Hip Hop in the media as all about getting money and being a victim rather than empowering community. It's a systematic attack on people of color through Hip Hop by promoting those who show terrible values. We need to bring Hip Hop back to its roots as protest music from the 80s. Many 60s musicians were successful but are still performing political songs, still protesting. Break down corporate hip-hop structure.

GOING BEYOND PROTEST

Andrea Assaf, Animating Democracy: I've been somewhat involved in the globalization protests since Seattle. No one believes me when I say that some of the best dialogue and deliberative democracy I've seen has been in anarchist collectives and planning meetings run by youth. They may not have any knowledge of this history, but they're doing it, and they're doing it differently. I've seen a resurgence of street theatre, puppetry, and poetry, all around protest. There are some advancements in social justice that would not have happened without mass mobilizations. What is the role of protest now? And how does it fit in with cultural work?

Leah Lamb, Performance Initiative: I'm so glad to hear the word *protest* at this conference. I've battled with this question in my own work. I went to the recent DC and NYC peace demonstrations. We felt powerful at the demo, but leaving it I felt so apathetic, disempowered. I started doing performance as protest. But I talked with people who felt protest around the Vietnam War tore the country apart. I want to give people a chance to talk about it. I appreciated Grace's comments about protest not being enough. But maybe we have to have the protest to have the dialogue.

Comment: Leah, what happened at that moment of apathy?

Leah Lamb: New York City streets were taken over by millions of people, and to see that being ignored by all the major media took away my belief in democracy.

Geno Roderiguez: I also felt the demonstrations were futile. We need new ways to protest: take out ads that say: All people around the world who are opposed to this war, go to the bank at the same time and withdraw your money. Citi Bank will call President Bush. It's risky, but we need new, creative ways: national, international havoc creation.

Grace Lee Boggs: After 9/11, Starhawk wrote *Only Poetry Can Address Grief*. Protest can't do that. We should get into small groups and talk. *I've Got the Light of Freedom*—organizing involves people in transformation (as opposed to mobilizing). It addresses the individual. I encourage you to read my article, "Everybody Has a Choice." It's dangerous just to protest. It helps the other side get mad at us. Appeal to the humanity of everybody; that's the role of artists. This is one of the most important discussions we can have—philosophical and practical.

Sandy Heierbacher, National Coalition of Dialogue & Deliberation: We live in a democracy where people are supposed to feel represented. But protest comes from people who feel disempowered by these traditional structures of "democracy." As we work in the system, we need to change the system. So representatives listen to us. Deliberative democracy—politicians need to be a part of those discussions as well.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: LEADING OR FOLLOWING?

Curtis: In organizing schools in New Orleans, we're trying to excavate what works—find all the good things, make them one. Coalition concept, for example. Create a skill bank, a resource bank that any of us can draw out when we need it. Tracing the traditional model of organizing—anger alone won't work, without negotiating, etc.

David: In a difficult world of oppression and hierarchy, there are two challenges: 1) organizing people of color, oppressed people; 2) addressing people in power. Are those two different audiences that require different tactics? Should we address how people have done those two things?

Caron Atlas: It's a question of agenda and point of view in the work. The Highlander Center asked: Where are people ready to act and how can we be of support? But Highlander has long history. Are you in front of the issue, or are you supporting people in struggle? Do you lead or support?

John Malpede: It's a pragmatic thing. You look to see. Sometimes you get a wild idea that has to happen. Sometimes you have to support.

Graciela Sanchez: Interconnectedness of issues still hasn't happened. *This Bridge Called my Back* is the bible for this. It's been 20 years now. At Esperanza, we asked people what they wanted to do. They asked us what to do. Sometimes I do take the leadership. Straight women of color are our biggest allies, despite the few number of out lesbians in San Antonio.

Jon Pounds, Chicago Public Art Group: The tension between leading and following can't ever be resolved. We have to be able to hold that ambivalence.

NEXT STEPS!

John O'Neal, Junebug Productions: There's so much to be said. The world is so huge. We have to find ways to discuss complicated things more thoroughly. Process recommendation for the future: smaller circles, perhaps with report backs. Our challenge now is how do we organize ourselves, move effectively for the future?

Vanessa Whang: How to sustain the conversation? This is my first Animating Democracy conference, my first conference where I want to talk to everybody. I showed up at party just as everybody is splitting. There is no convening organization I know of that's national and gets folks together. There's a lot we can learn from each other.

Curtis: The Color Line Project will accept ideas of how to do that.

Talvin Wilkes, New World Theater: Is this the galvanizing moment? Is something going to grow from this? Have we stepped into a particular moment? A platform? A mandate? What are the issues we haven't talked about yet?

(Participants from this session met again several times throughout the convening, of their own volition and on their own time, to continue this conversation. Approximately 50 people convened under a tree on the grounds of the Flint Cultural Center that evening. Smaller conversations continued late into the night in hotel lobbies after scheduled conference programming concluded. Some met again over breakfast on Sunday morning. At the closing session of the National Exchange, a volunteer organizing committee announced the planning of a follow-up meeting to be held in New Orleans in January 2004, to continue dialogue on the subject of arts and activism, and the role of cultural work in social "revolution and evolution" in the 21st century.

This convening will be hosted by Junebug Productions in New Orleans, January 23-25, 2004. For more information, contact Lisa Mount at lqmount@earthlink.net.)