

Reflections & Closing

SESSION DESCRIPTION: *ANIMATING* has been the focus of our past two days. This morning we conclude the *National Exchange on Art & Civic Dialogue* by considering, in conversation and through art, the other word in our title—*DEMOCRACY*.

How do the idea, ideal, and reality of democracy at this moment in history provide context, challenges, and possibilities for our work?

David O'Fallon facilitates a conversation about democracy among invited Exchange participants including Grace Lee Boggs, David Thelen, Pete Galindo, and Margaret Morgan-Hubbard followed by an invitation for everyone to reflect on the convening as a whole and consider the next chapter of this work. We will ask ourselves, individually and collectively: *What will be our new story?*

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS: Liz Lerman, Alice Lovelace, Shirley Mae Springer Staten

RECORDED MUSIC: Terry Dame

WORD ASSOCIATION

Andrea Assaf, Animating Democracy: We're going to begin with a few minutes of reflection before entering this morning's discussion of democracy, aided by Terry Dame's original composition using found objects and built instruments. "America the...Everything is...Beautiful" was commissioned by artist Marty Pottenger for an *Animating Democracy Learning Exchange*, in Chicago, November 2001, as part of an exploration around citizenship and feelings about the United States. Those of you who were here on Thursday night saw a video clip of the live performance. The recording is 9 minutes long. As we're listening, we'd like to offer a word-association exercise. We've put on these boards some phrases that have stood out this weekend. If/when you have the impulse during the next nine minutes, feel free to step up to one of these boards, choose a color, and respond to or build from these words. Drawing or movement is also welcome.

To begin the session, the following words were written on the board:

Move beyond protest	Touched a nerve!	Touched a nerve!	What do we do well?
What do we leave out?	Connect generations	Connect to future	Democracy now
Move it forward	"Put the neighbor back in the hood."		

People approached the boards and participated while "America the...Everything is...Beautiful" was played.

REFLECTIONS ON DEMOCRACY

David O'Fallon facilitated a conversation about democracy among invited National Exchange participants—Grace Lee Boggs, Pete Galindo, Margaret Morgan Hubbard, David Thelen, and Homer Jackson— followed by an invitation for everyone to reflect on the topic and the convening as a whole.

David O'Fallon, MacPhail Center for Music: Our panel participants have been asked to share a story or insight, responding to the question: *How do the idea, ideal, and reality of democracy at this moment in history provide context, challenges, and possibilities for our work?*

Pete Galindo, SPARC: My story is about one of the youngest participants. Amira, a young woman from *Project 2050*, shared a poem in the workshop and a story of art's significance to changing someone's perception of an individual or a group. In the poem, she described that school is really inept at teaching her. It does the opposite; it closes her off from the rest of the world. She performed the poem at her own school and her teachers were all in the audience. At the beginning of the school year, a teacher called her to his desk and said "Well, we're going to try to

make this year a little better for you.” That’s the substantive power of art. It brings people to their best places. It reminds me of the work that began SPARC.

I’m reminded of Judy Baca’s work. SPARC started in Boyle Heights, working in centers of gang conflict. Working with young people in the parks. We weren’t pointing to issues or saying to the kids what they were doing was wrong. We were identifying those things that act as a positive force in people’s lives—their social networks, their familial ties, their desire to transform the walls to murals. This transformed to a murals program. The idea of art for civic dialogue goes back simply to what people have been doing for thousands of years: performing society, drawing society, re-imagining society in ways that language can’t accomplish. In ways that war can’t accomplish. In ways that conflict can’t accomplish. It’s a method of healing. It’s important to me as an artist to go to where healing is needed. When funders ask for quantitative results, say “I can’t do that for you. You’ll have to experience it yourself.”

Margaret Morgan Hubbard, Democracy Collaborative: As a young person, I understood the message of our democracy to be: “You are better off than all other people in the world—you have greater wealth, rights and freedom than anyone, anywhere; so shut up—Shut The Hell Up!” Since 9/11, the message is: “You have too many rights and freedoms for your own good, so give them up—Give Them Up and Shut The Hell Up about it.”

Well we can’t shut up and we won’t give them up. We have never even seen the democracy we crave, and we can’t let them take away our chances of ever getting there.

Our freedom is being held hostage to our material well-being. Our elected and self-appointed officials are telling us, as incipient fascism has always told the people, that you can’t have safety and freedom, prosperity and peace. It is certainly true that we can’t maintain a prosperity that is based on stripping the rest of the world of its resources. Together with major corporations, the rulers of the “first world” have created their wealth by depleting the resources of less developed, third world countries—countries arbitrarily carved into being by colonialists who then distributed weapons and encouraged people to fight over boundaries that shouldn’t even exist. And now the chickens are coming home to roost.

Rather than being loved as a beacon of democracy, our country is widely hated for being a lawless bully and thief. We are accused of hypocrisy, elitism, and callousness. Ironically, as our nation fills with more and more immigrants from those parts of the world we have helped to under-develop, our government tries to hold us together with old paradigms and rhetoric and pretends that despite our differences, we can be all be united as “One nation under one God, indivisible, with white culture and misogyny for all.”

But we can’t and we won’t.

If we want to fight the fascism that is rapidly replacing our freedom, the terrorism and warfare that is threatening our peace and justice, the return of patriarchy and the dominance of a monotheistic, white culture, we need to appeal to our most artistic and creative selves. We need to find our commonalities and celebrate our uniqueness. We need to return the world to its ecological balance and find ways to live within its means—we need to give up the notion that we can appropriate it all in order to have it all.

The new world order we create has to be for all of us everywhere—we need to insist upon a single standard of material and spiritual well-being for people all over the world.

Our new paradigm has to be far broader and more inclusive than it has ever been—not simply multi-cultural, but multi-national. Our agenda as artist/activists is to re-envision and recreate the world by restoring and preserving the land and agreeing to *take less and give more*. Artists know how to do this. Artists have always given back more than they take in; they are driven by the need to share their gifts with others.

Let’s work together on the huge local and global project to overturn fascism and corporate dominance by putting our collective talents in the service of a worldwide redistribution of wealth and power.

David Thelen, Indiana University: I experienced the conference with some wonderful democratic moments. But I’m also frustrated that they didn’t add up to an idea of “How do we animate democracy?” I guess that’s still my question.

Walt Whitman said, “Democracy is a great word whose history has yet to be written because that history has yet to be enacted.” I believe our hope for democracy comes from our democratic experiences in everyday life. From our relationships with others, where we experience democratic values of mutual respect and trust. This is the place where we can build democracy.

Our schools are the crucial place to start, by what they teach and model. Currently, schools teach competition and deference—mostly they create boredom, fatalism, and resignation. On our first morning here, someone said, “In a society of universal deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” Indeed it is, but we mystify that. I don’t think it’s so strange—truth—we’ve learned it in our everyday. We evaluate what it means by our everyday experience.

I heard this weekend, “Experience trumps data.” Arts can help us imagine how to take everyday experiences and translate them into a working democracy. The artistic moment is where artist intention and viewer’s perception meet. My hope is that we can work together to turn democratic everyday life experience into a functioning democratic society.

Homer Jackson, artist: I am a frog. As an individual artist, not institutionally affiliate, I am a frog. I live between two worlds. I protect you from mosquitoes. But I’m endangered. I’m the first in the chain that experiences the poison you put into the world. I swim in the shit.

I think about Grace’s statement: “Put the neighbor back in the hood.” Isn’t that what democracy is all about? Since the culture wars, we artists have been affected. We’ve covered up how the arts community has changed, and that the frog is not important anymore . . . In 1995, Alice Lovelace and I were on a task force for the National Association of Artist Organizations; the result was the need for a code of ethics [for how we treat each other in the art world]. I look back at that moment and know we need to revisit this. *The Three Willies* almost didn’t happen because of not being neighborly [between project partners]. I never saw the proposal for the budget for our project until just before the first convening of Animating Democracy. I will never work on another project that I don’t write the proposal for. We need to develop this code of ethics, and learn what our shared responsibilities are.

I don’t come to many conferences, and I’m glad I don’t, because I feel high. Like I have a sugar high. Two weeks later, I come down. What I’ve begun to realize is that I’m not having a depression or a let down; actually, I’m just coming back down to earth. I realize I’ve been floating above my experience, but I need to look at the landscape, so when I do come down to earth, I can choose my path for the future; so I can see where to go next when I’m back down in the mud.

Grace Lee Boggs: I put more work into the speech for this gathering than I’ve ever put into anything. I did so because I have so much faith in the power of art and artists. And, I did so because the times are so perilous, and so much is demanded of us. I think that artists can point the way. I’ve had such a wonderful time here—to have the privilege to make the speech, and to have touched a nerve with so many people. To have people respond about [the current state of] schools and education, and how we need to create something new. Young people want us to create something new. It’s been such a privilege to talk to people about the struggle. To talk to John O’Neal and Curtis Muhammad and Wayne Winborne; to engage in a conversation that has an enormous impact.

I make a request of all of you: Pete said something about a kind of healing that is necessary, a kind of reaching out that cannot be done by conflict or war. There are all those people who Bush addresses at the military bases. There are all the people who support us going to war, who are a great danger. I ask you to do something: Go to the people out there not in our choirs who think that conflict and domination is the way we can achieve security. Tell them there is another way. We need to see our cities, country, and planet as our hood, and *bring the neighbor back into the hood*. That is the truest thing we can do as our legacy as a nation.

The kids at the Open Mic last night talked about the cosmos. Do we talk about the cosmos that way? Is that part of our imagination? Can we listen to them? I would like to see every one of us go out on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday to a church, school, community and say: Every one of us has a choice, every one of us can be better than we are. You don’t have to choose to be the slave owners. The choices can be difficult. They can make each of us a better human being. They can make a better country. We can do it! It is not beyond our power.

What we have to do is reach into our hearts and think in very different ways than Bush and our whole culture teaches us thinks about it.

David O’Fallon: Grace is good at reminding us that this is NOT beyond our capacity.

Homer reminded us that with the great claims we make for the arts as healers, sometimes we do not treat each other with the same open heart and respect. Pete reminded us that the roots and foundations of our work are generations old.

Although, this is our moment! Take a few moments to share stories from the last few days of our work, and how we can take this work out into the future.

Broke into small groups of 3-4 for discussions.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Lee Bell, Neighborhood Roundtable: I’d like to say thank you for all the creative energy, love, renewed hope that you’ve brought to my life by being here. Thank you for what you have brought to Flint.

Maribel Alvarez, MACLA: I was remembering the first Animating Democracy conference in Long Island, NY and I have to say that I am struck and touched. I’ve never been in a project where the organizers have learned so much through the process along with the people they were funding. In Long Island, there was a particular notion of what dialogue is, lots of hand-outs and consultants. It was very contrived; you had to fit into a package. [As time has gone by, Animating Democracy staff] has just moved themselves out of the way so that, by the end of the day, we had many possible forms of dialogue, many different enactments in democracy, learning that allowed for dissent, alternative visions. It doesn’t happen this way very often. It’s a remarkable achievement. There’s such a different feeling at this conference—openness to be a dissenter even. I want to offer real, sincere thanks for modeling the process of growth and learning.

Ana Maria Imízcoz, Teatro Activo: For me, this experience is significant. I’ve been to the United States many times, and it’s the first time I’ve been around people with such a critical attitude. It gives me hope. We depend on you...too much. If we don’t find you people doing some kind of change, *what is going to happen to us?* And I’m really shocked because...I think you are sincere! I think it’s true. I think the way you talk about yourselves reflects profound thinking. It’s the first time I’ve been around Americans who don’t say everything is perfect in their lives. [laughter] It’s the first time I’ve been with human beings. Thank you.

Graciela Sanchez, Esperanza Center: We’re interested in continuing the conversation. We are discussing meeting in New Orleans. (Ask people on the organizing committee to stand) John O’Neal has offered to host us. We want people to want to be there. We want 50 percent to be people of color, especially working class and poor. We want youth. But it costs money. We’re asking for pledges. See all the people standing—they are willing to take your pledge and business card.

Kathie de Nobriga, Animating Democracy liaison: But if you have money today... (She hands a check to Graciela)

John O’Neal, Junebug Productions: If you don’t have money, but have frequent flyer points, you can pledge that too. If you are interested in attending or would like more information, contact Lisa Mount: lmount@earthlink.net.

Kathie de Nobriga: A challenge for myself, I think that there is another model I want to explore. Instead of being a reactor to pain and misery, be a pro-actor. In that vein, I want to urge you, because I’ve done it, please run for office. Any office. Run for office. Any office.

Regie Cabico, artist: My highlight was hearing the Neo Griot collective perform. What saddened me was that they have no mentorship. They didn’t know Bruce Bradley until last night. They turned to me for advice. I was touched, but saddened. Bringing neighbor back into hood: even if they can have a space like this to perform in.

ARTIST REFLECTIONS

Alice Lovelace, artist: I have been eavesdropping on your conversations, and created a “GroupSpeak.” This is as I have heard it over the last few days. These are all your words, presented chronologically, except for the ending.

Alice performed the GroupSpeak, Answering the Call of the Drums.

Liz Lerman came to the stage and took a deep bow to Alice.

Liz Lerman, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange: Take a breath and just look around the room. Repeated 3 times. And see who’s here. I feel most alive when I get to live backwards and forward at the same time. By living backwards I mean I get to remember. I get to reorganize. I have had many moments of living backwards and forward in the past few days, and this is one of them.

[Speaking to the young people in the audience] I’m so glad you’re here. In 50 years you will get to stand here and bow to someone who has been your teacher.

The thing I love about movement is it can mean anything. What can it mean to you?

Liz moved through six gestures, created by the group during her Friday afternoon Dialogic Within Creative Practice session. She shared the meaning of the gestures when the group created them, and also new meanings from memories of important moments throughout the Exchange. Participants followed several times without music.

The group performed the movements again with music by Bob Eon. Then with text: John Borstel read a reiteration of Boggs’ words, as he and Liz heard them:

She said, "Euro-Americans have to change their perspective to understand that they are now one of many minorities."

She said, "We have to see the anger of so much of the world against U.S. domination as a challenge rather than a threat."

She said, "The problem with identity politics is that it’s led us to think in terms of determinism rather than self-determination."

She said, "We haven’t re-conceptualized democracy as it relates to our children."

She said, "There’s a terrible healing that needs to take place in this country. "

She said, "Think beyond rebellion."

She said, "Increase the courage."

Shirley Mae Springer Staten closed by leading the group in three closing songs:

From You I Receive, We Are Going, and Keep On Movin’ Forward.