

# Critical Relations in Community-Based Performance: The Artist and Writer in Conversation

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On the final morning of the Alternate ROOTS 25th Anniversary Focus on Community Arts South (FOCAS) conference, exploring relationships among community-based performance, activism, and writing, facilitator Kathie deNobriga called upon participants to list positive aspects of the three-day gathering. Among accolades for performances, low-priced food, and story circles, I raised what I felt to be a critical point of transition and possibility for the organization. "Continuing to affirm that theory and thinking are not just academic concerns." The roomful of artists, activists, funders, and writers responded with enthusiasm. I took heart at this support for what remains for me a thickly layered statement, hinging on the multiple meanings of "just" and "academic." In order for artists concerned with animating community and writers responding to their work to together promote principled (just) causes, we must agree that thinking deeply is of concern to everyone, not only (just) those employed by educational institutions.

The relationship of respectful critical thinking, reflection, documentation, and evaluation to community-based performance practices has begun to more fully develop over the past several years, alongside insights and productive tensions integral to any intimate relationship. Finding common language, concerns, and frameworks of reference remains an ongoing pursuit for those interested in dialogic rather than antagonistic relationships between writers and artists. Stimulated by the Animating Democracy Initiative's (ADI) *Critical Perspectives* focus<sup>i</sup>, and initiatives emerging from the Regional Organization of Theaters/Artists South (Alternate ROOTS), and the Community Arts Network (CAN)<sup>ii</sup>, this essay draws upon several recent conversations considering relationships between writers and community-based artists, primarily theater artists. These catalyzing forces, at ADI, ROOTS, and CAN have inspired panel discussions, symposia, and perhaps most importantly, conversations in hallways, theaters, parks, and cafes, about the many meanings and values a performance can inspire.

A number of these conversations reverberated through the libraries, conference rooms, and lawns at the above-referenced ROOTS convening. The FOCAS conference celebrated 25 years of ROOTS work with a vibrant community of artists and cultural workers who make art in, with, by, for, and about their communities. The conference also mounted a Writer's Institute first held at a 1986 ROOTS festival featuring informal conversations among writers, one-on-one feedback sessions with artists, and the panel "The Next Frontier of Community Arts Criticism: What do Artists and Writers Want?" with three writers, two artists, and the editor of *American Theatre* magazine. Several conversations at the conference drew on the threads of this panel. Prior to the FOCAS panel, Linda Frye Burnham had initiated a public web conversation with the panel's writers, including Jan Cohen-Cruz and myself, where we discussed our relationships to the primary artists about whom we write. One week after FOCAS, the University of Minnesota sponsored a conference that continued to examine critical relationships between artists and writers, placing three pairs of artists and critics in conversation with each other. Each of these sites, alongside ADI's *Critical Perspectives* projects, offers productive spaces to map out the need for both common and critical languages to further the impact of civically engaged art.

## BUILDING DIALOGUE

Questions about reflective and evaluative responses to community-based performance have at least a brief history of engagement. In her FOCAS presentation, drawn from "[Telling and Listening in Public: The Critical Discourse](#)," Linda Burnham succinctly surveys recent responses to community-engaged performance, beginning with Arlene Croce's infamous nonreview of Bill T. Jones' dance piece *Still/Here*. Writing about, yet refusing to view, what she termed "victim art," Croce's New Yorker response emerged as a flashpoint for new critical discussions. In her New York Times response, author Joyce Carol Oates pointed out that excellent criticism, like the best art, must evolve over time. In community-based theater, this evolution requires a dramatic change in perspective.

Jan Cohen-Cruz's FOCAS presentation referenced the scientist Thomas Kuhn to explain the need for a paradigm shift in responses to community-based art. Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* describes how what we see is impacted by how we see and what we have been taught to expect. According to Cohen-Cruz, in order to engage a shift in frameworks of meaning, community-based theater requires a kind of aesthetic closeness rather than the more commonly held beliefs about the need for aesthetic distance. In remarks at the University of Minnesota, activist and writer David Román echoed Cohen-Cruz in his call for "critical generosity" that pays attention to how the work matters to the particular communities from which it emerges. Referencing AIDS-impacted art derived from within the queer community in Los Angeles, Román asserts:

To simply go to my computer and start saying, "Well, they had really good intentions but the writing wasn't all that strong, I wasn't sure what the piece was about, the movement wasn't that interesting, it seemed derivative," was more about my need to claim a certain level of expertise. I didn't like that voice. So, I thought it would be okay for me to begin to explore the energies in the room, the investments that people brought to the space, the multiple labors involved, and the joy of being part of something incredibly meaningful and beautiful in that particular moment.

This kind of generosity, or what cultural writer Gayatri Spivak terms critical intimacy<sup>iii</sup>, requires a perhaps closer relationship between artist and critic than is generally deemed appropriate in either mainstream press or scholarly journals.

Community-based artists have voiced their stake in how this critical relationship gets forged as well, calling for more direct participation in writing about their work. At the FOCAS panel, Linda Burnham pointed out that the articles most referenced in *High Performance*, a magazine she cofounded, were those written by artists. When artists and writers work together, a different kind of relation needs to be imagined. At the University of Minnesota symposium, performance artist Tim Miller spoke of the crucial need for more border crossing that broke from a binary model separating the artist from the writer. In a more bifurcated model, Miller warns, "the artist can occasionally emerge as a kind of exotic woolly mammoth."

Though examples of border-crossing dialogues between artists and writers are emergent, some artists still express anxieties about these relationships. When asked at the FOCAS panel "what artists want from writers," Cornerstone Theater ensemble member Lynn Jeffries initially responded, "Leave us alone!" In thinking further about the question, however, Jeffries determined that writers did have useful skills to offer civically engaged artists, such as describing Cornerstone's ongoing efforts to strike a balance between art and activism, and taking the work seriously enough to speak about it complexly. "It's about capturing the record, deepening the dialogue," adds Cornerstone Artistic Director Bill Rauch<sup>iv</sup>. "Our relationship with writers has changed the way the company thinks and talks about its work."

Long time activist/artist and FOCAS panelist John O'Neal claims that this relationship becomes productive when artists, audiences, and writers share mutual goals, particularly agreeing that the best art provides insight into the social circumstances that prevail at the time the artwork is created. "The aesthetic function, the function of art, is to raise the question and explore the answers of 'How do we make it better?' The critic's job is to say to the artist whatever seems appropriate to help explore this question, and also to consult with the third party of this

communication experience, the audience. As long as all three parties share the same big mission of what it is and how to make it better, then all three come together in their diverse relationships to the "it," which is possessed curiously enough by none of them."<sup>v</sup>

While common goals and engaged dialogue remain important to both artists and writers, the actual language used can become a site of productive tension. For David Román, the precision of theoretical discourse conveys more complicated meanings to an admittedly smaller community of scholars. Tim Miller proposes that in turn, performers may become more interested in writing that expands on the ideas in their work. ROOTS artist Paul Bonin Rodriguez adds, "We as artists all operate with theory, and there's an active naming that goes on in academic discourse that's really important. As an artist I have a lot to learn from what I'm already doing that you've noticed, and from where that might take me and make me think. These dialogic practices are really wonderful because they challenge the artists to keep thinking."

Speaking from a slightly different cultural viewpoint, hip-hop dance artist Rennie Harris suggests that sharing dialogue may require both artists and writers to code switch, and to understand how language intersects with power. "As a black person living in North Philadelphia I recognize that I always have to know the language of the people that are running the world. I have to speak clearly and slowly so that I am judged equally. But I'm also going to challenge critics to come to my neighborhood. Can you stay there? Can you hang in there? Can you keep on going and learn how to have an appreciation and not an appropriation of the culture?" Embracing commonalities, yet maintaining distinct languages that bear the possibility of mutual translations, working together to enrich the complexity of their mutual work, deepening the dialogue, together builds an atmosphere of trust. This atmosphere allows for assessment, documentation, and reflection, in which productive tensions about the purpose and function of civically engaged arts may still emerge. Perhaps one of the most important services that the writer can provide to the field of community-based arts is in the capacity to archive and historically situate a performance record.

## DEEPENING THE CONVERSATION: DOCUMENTATION AND REFLECTION

Though practitioners do try to document their work, and many such as muralist Judy Baca insist on the artist's need to articulate their own self-analyses, some artists express difficulties finding time to step outside the creative process. Robert Gard, a grassroots theater practitioner and writer working in the 1950s, lamented this loss of historical information. "Perhaps because of the demands upon grassroots practitioners, because of the very complexity of the things they attempted, they did not bring themselves to write down their experiences."<sup>vi</sup> ROOTS member Anne Kilkelly adds, "It's so important for writers to document and describe and disseminate information about community-based performance. It's difficult for people to know about the work [otherwise] because it doesn't often travel."

While marking what artists occasionally do not have time to attend to, writers can also exceed the descriptive to include analysis and reflection. If writers keep too much distance from artists in developing these analyses, however, they run the risk of objectification (the Woolly Mammoth syndrome) or of cultural misappropriation. Writers must "go to the neighborhood," even if they don't sit down for a meal. Staying in communication can also prevent misreadings, slips in tone, or inaccurate reporting. Rennie Harris observes that critics who write about his work without a historical understanding of hip-hop tend to perceive the pieces only as acrobatic spectacle, reinscribing cultural stereotypes about the exotic black male body. A review from the April 13, 2002 *San Antonio Express News* describes Harris's dance as a performance that "can make one gasp like a child who has seen fireworks for the first time." Noting that this image of fireworks may over-eroticize the dancers, Harris responds, "It's these six black men up there and we're doing the thing and all the reviewer can do is get excited like this is Chippendales."

In addition to falling back on cultural archetypes, a writer might not recognize biases, assumptions, and conventional frames of reference, all of which can lead to inaccuracies in documentation. Lynn Jeffries's comments on my book manuscript about Cornerstone proved invaluable in this regard. Without her sharp eye, I might have misquoted farmer Ron Temple's comparison of theater to crop cultivation, confusing a grain (milo)

with a reflective set dressing (mylar). Jeffries also gently pointed out slips in tone. "To my ear, this phrase came off as a little condescending, though I'm sure that wasn't your intent." When writers do not share their reflections with artists, further misreadings often result. At the FOCAS panel Jeffries spoke of how I had "seen" a chorus of old men sitting on a bench outside of a general store in Cornerstone's original production *The Pretty Much True Story of Dinwiddie County*. The men actually sat at a table indoors—moved each day between the store and the stage set. The archetypal image of southern men on a bench prevented me from actually seeing the men at the table. At other times I have written about Cornerstone "seeking out" members of a Native American population in Maine when in fact several tribal leaders sought out Cornerstone members to make sure their local Passamaquoddy tribe was involved in an upcoming production of *Pier Gynt*.

Following this discussion between Lynn and myself, critic and *American Theater* editor Jim O'Quinn emphasized the importance of "getting it right" and of the obstacles to doing so. O'Quinn cited an example of a subhead he added to an article on a collaboration between Roadside Theater, Junebug, and Pregones Theater based in New York. The subhead referenced the "mean streets of the Bronx," a cliché that O'Quinn only "saw" later. "It was simply something thoughtless that comes out of those archetypes, and clichés that we have in our heads. I knew the story, I edited this story, I realized that Pregones's contribution to the piece was not about poverty and urban struggle. Still that cliché came out of my head." Over several years, O'Quinn learned to rethink those archetypes and assumptions about community-based performance, and to engage in and disseminate through *American Theater* a critical paradigm shift about the work in consultation with civically engaged artists.

Sociologist Elaine Lawless refers to this kind of mutual engagement between a subject and observer in documentation as reciprocal ethnography. In this kind of engagement, the artist/subject no longer functions as a naïve and/or exotic object of study, and the writer serves as more than a parasitic voice of judgment from afar. Lawless instead proposes that "we present ourselves in our texts as we are in our work: humans seeking understanding, engaged in dialogue and interpretations with others"<sup>vii</sup>. Pedagogue and activist theorist Paulo Freire offers a complementary point of view, emphasizing the need for "the oppressed," those who tend to have less voice in a society, to represent and speak for themselves<sup>viii</sup>.

In concert with Freire and Lawless, ADI's *Critical Perspectives* offers a number of ways for participants in a community-based project to voice themselves in partnership with writers. Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA) in San Jose, California, is immersed in a project that brings together photographic and oral histories with public dialogue, exploring inter and intraethnic relations between Asians and Latinos in the Silicon Valley. Writers involved in the project draw on sociology, ethnography, and visual arts analysis to reflect upon the project's impact. In Blue Lake, California, Dell 'Arte theater's *Dentalium Project* examines the conflict surrounding the construction of a Native American casino in the small rural town of Blue Lake. Community members will voice their concerns through a related video documentary that, along with ongoing civic dialogues, will propel the creation of a new play. The project employs three writers' perspectives in tandem with these community voices. One focuses on the impact of gambling in the community, and the culture of gambling in Native American society, through the viewpoint of a Native American writer. A second perspective examines how an arts organization might shape local culture and conversation. The project will also explore "theater of place," that speaks to a particular community within an historical moment of importance to that community.

## ASSESSMENTS

Despite, or perhaps because of, these spaces of mutual engagement among artists, community participants, and writers, there remains a need in civically engaged art for critical assessment. As community-based artists themselves point out, if not thoughtfully engaged, activist art may have the potential for neocolonialism. José Luis Valenzuela, a UCLA theater professor and director who works mainly with Latinos in Los Angeles, points towards the danger of an artist "coming into a community that they haven't taken enough time to investigate and be inside of." He warns that "paternalism can exist, or the savior idea, or exoticism that communities offer through economic or social conditions"<sup>ix</sup>. While a writer might need to "visit the artist's neighborhood," he or she can also help to ask questions about the artist's own visitations—about process and power, the extent to

which an event succeeds at civic animation, the appropriate representation of traumatic events, and the intersection between arts and economics. But civically engaged art also calls for some kind of content-based assessment. Artists such as John O'Neal, Rennie Harris, and Liz Lerman each ask for such a response, though in distinctly different ways.

Harris asserts that critics have the right to respond viscerally to what they see, and at the same time, the responsibility to inform themselves about its cultural history and formal aspects. "There wasn't a dialogue between me and critics because-why? Why should I have a dialogue if I have to teach them about the whole culture?" According to Harris, critics such as the San Antonio Express reviewer sensationalize black dance, remaining blind to its formal constraints and thus its innovations. "They don't know if it's taken out of its context, or if it's being stretched or being done badly. They don't know they may have seen sixteen forms of different hip-hop in one night. They all put it under the umbrella of break dancing."

But for Burnham, Román, and many other writers, context remains as important as formal evaluation. "I am not well-informed in dance," admits Burnham in her CAN conversation, "so in writing about 'Hallelujah,' I have had to walk rather gingerly around the formal dance aspects of this initiative-which are important to Liz and especially to her dancers." Burnham focuses more on the community aspects of the work, while also engaging in the viscosity of her responses and those of others in the room. David Román emphasizes the importance of this contextual assessment. To defend some work only on the basis of artistic merit, he stresses, can become an exercise in relativism, in which key artistic paradigm shifts remain invisible.

Liz Lerman herself has developed a well-known method of artistic feedback that calls for opinions to be transformed into questions.<sup>x</sup> As John O'Neal reminds us, this kind of response depends upon an agreement between the artist and respondent about the work's goals. Still, Lerman has identified a set of criteria for excellence that she observed in both trained and untrained performers. According to Cohen-Cruz, Lerman uses the example of seeing a woman in a nursing home make a "marvelous movement with her forearm. She observed the woman exhibit these four characteristics: 100 percent commitment to the movement, an understanding of why she was doing it, revelation of something about herself and her world, and overcoming some kind of hurdle in the process."

Lerman's criteria, O'Neal's shared goals, Harris's call for engagement, and Cornerstone's appreciation for the "deepening of dialogue" about the work all depend upon vital critical attention and thoughtful evaluative criteria. At the same time, a multiplicity of critical perspectives demands attention to civic values as well as aesthetic quality. Theatre Communications Group Executive Director, Ben Cameron, recently called for a reassessment of how we value theater arts. In two 1998 editorials, Cameron emphasized the need for artists to articulate their value to society, as opposed to focusing only on determinants of artistic quality.<sup>xi</sup>

Given these ongoing concerns for building and deepening dialogue about the many ways to reflect upon and assess the value of civic arts, the intricacies of writing about community-based work continue to astound. The calls for code-switching, reciprocity, intimacy, and indignation remain difficult to balance. Nuances of word choice challenge writers to be ever more reflective and vigilant about how they relate events. Relationships among culture, space, power, and knowledge require activist artists to be ever more aware of the repercussions of how they engage their projects. Working together, writers and artists can help each other to continue advancing a complex conversation about ethical civic engagement. These are deeply important matters; not just academic concerns.

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<sup>i</sup> The Animating Democracy Initiative (ADI) is a four-year program based at Americans for the Arts and funded by the Ford Foundation. Its purpose is to foster artistic activity that encourages civic dialogue on important contemporary issues. *Critical Perspectives* is an ADI effort promoting inquiry into and reflection on three of 32 arts-based civic dialogue projects supported by ADI. *Critical Perspectives* strives to promote and expand conversations associated with the artwork and its many meanings and values. Recognizing that existing forms of critical writing might not attend to features unique to civically engaged art and arts-based civic dialogue, the initiative seeks multiple forms of inquiry and styles of writing that deepen descriptions of the work and open up ways to talk about its effectiveness. Through various forms of authority that move critical writing beyond an academic sphere, a range of writers including peer artists, ethnographers, journalists, and project participants offer multiple points of view, or perspectives on the art work.

<sup>ii</sup> The Community Arts Network is designed and managed by a partnership of Art in the Public Interest, a national nonprofit organization, and The Virginia Tech Department of Theatre Arts Consortium for the Study of Theatre and Community. Virginia Tech personnel include Bob Leonard, Ann Kilkelly, and Len Hatfield. Steve Durland and Linda Frye Burnham cofounded and codirect Art in the Public Interest.

<sup>iii</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, New York: Methuen, 1987.

<sup>iv</sup> Bill Rauch, "Critical Relations: The Artist and Writer in Conversation." University of Minnesota Symposium. 26 April 2002.

<sup>v</sup> O'Neal expands on these points in "The Thing About Criticism," in *Reimagining America: The Arts of Social Change*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Craig Little, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1990: 199-204.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Gard, cited in Linda Frye Burnham, "Factors for Success," a report for the Irvine Foundation's *Telling and Listening in Public: Organizers and Artists Building Civic Partnerships*. March 2000: 14.

<sup>vii</sup> Elaine Lawless, "I was afraid someone like you . . . an outsider . . . would misunderstand': Negotiating Interpretive Differences Between Ethnographers and Subjects," *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 302-314.

<sup>viii</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 20th Anniversary ed., New York: Continuum, 1996.

<sup>ix</sup> José Luis Valenzuela, telephone interview with author, 6 June 2001.

<sup>x</sup> Liz Lerman, "Towards a Process for Critical Response," *Are Miracles Enough? Selected Writings on Art and Community 1983-1994*, Washington D.C.: Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, 1994: 17-19.

<sup>xi</sup> Ben Cameron, "The Missing Link," *American Theater*, November 1998: 6 and "Essential Values," *American Theater*, December 1998: 6.