

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

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As We See It

As we plan for the 1988 national Alliance for Cultural Democracy gathering which will be held in February in the Bay area (Spring in that part of the world) and as we struggle out of and shrug off the suffocating cloak of Reaganism, here are some speculations on the state of the cultural democracy movement.

As cultural activists, we consider ourselves to be history makers and not mere spectators to a present that phantasmagorically unfolds before our eyes on the "6:00 News" each night. The future is not out there just waiting for us to catch up to it. The future is always in the making, in process. Similarly, culture is a process of creative expression in which we, as human beings are constantly engaged.

Despite the continuous onslaught of corporate culture, this is a very exciting time for the cultural democracy movement. We are not in retreat, as the "big chill" media contends, but are alive and kicking. We are the grass that pushes through the cracks in the pavement on city streets. We will not go away. We resist. We grow. We will not be disappeared.

We have many manifestations — from muralists to graffiti artists; from arts administrators working to use government monies to support cultural pluralism to anarchists questioning government itself; from the "nuevo cancion" movement to the cassette underground; from theatre based on the words of factory workers to mythic pageants of puppets and poetry, from the political "big picture" to the continuing work on local issues. Some of our works many will recognize as art; others, some may call organizing. You have only to look just beneath the glossy veneer of an impoverished consumer culture to find the depth, multiplicity, activity, wealth and joy of alternative cultures.

Everywhere one hears a growing awareness that something is dreadfully wrong in the U.S.A. The question for the future is not how we can convince people that there is a problem. They already know that. It is the bankruptcy of the current solutions which must be addressed. Not even the yuppie banquet of materialism can satisfy our growing national malaise. None

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CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

CULTURAL DEMOCRACY means that culture is an essential human need and that each person and community has the right to a culture or cultures of their choice; that all communities should have equitable access to the material resources of the commonwealth for their cultural expression; that cultural values and policies should be decided in public debate with the guaranteed participation of all communities; that the government does not have the right to favor one culture over another.

THE ALLIANCE FOR CULTURAL DEMOCRACY supports community cultural participation. We believe in cultural pluralism, and understand the necessity to integrate the struggles for cultural, political, and economic democracy in the United States. The most important initiatives for cultural democracy take place on a grassroots level in communities, neighborhoods, and among activist artists and other progressive cultural workers.

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Dancing The Incomprehensible



Photo by Joel Hauseman

From "Atomic Priests" by Dance Exchange

I imagine that one reason our ancestors danced was that it was a means of understanding the incomprehensible. For them it might have been the rising sun, patterns of animal life surrounding them, or the birth of a child. For me, in my life, the incomprehensible often is the imagery from the political world of Washington, D.C., my home. Over the years I have used dance-making as a way to educate myself about contemporary matters. I have been developing a choreographic process which includes research, improvisation, attention to structure, a search for humor, and the contributions from an inspiring group of performers ranging in age from 24 to 90.

Several years ago I spotted an article in *The Washington Post* which alerted me to potentially interesting subject matter. The Department of Energy was concerned about the risks of high level radioactive waste and had convened a group of people to study the problem. As outlined in this article, a major concern was how to warn future generations to stay away from waste disposal sites during the next 10,000 years, the amount of time estimated for the radioactivity to become stable. This group had come up with several alternatives. Curious, I wrote away for the documents. In fairness to the writers of the report, there were, indeed, many substantive questions raised and some answers provided in the text. However, nowhere in the documents was there discussion of the most elementary question about why we have the waste, or what might be done to change the structures in our lives that lead to the development of so much high level radioactive waste. I chose to concentrate on essentially one section.

In the section of the report entitled "Communication Measures to Bridge Ten Millennia", the following appears:

The first recommendation . . . "that information be launched and artificially passed on into the short-term and long term future with the supplementary aid of folkloristic devices

. . . the legend and ritual, as now envisaged, would be tantamount to laying a 'false trail', meaning that the uninitiated will be steered away from the hazardous site for reasons other than the scientific knowledge of the possibility of radiation . . . essentially the reason would be accumulated to shun a certain area permanently."

The report continues by discussing who would guard the real information. They suggest: "The actual 'truth' would be entrusted exclusively to — what we might call for dramatic emphasis — an 'atomic priesthood', that is, a commission for knowledgeable physicists, experts in radiation sickness, anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, semioticians, . . . Membership in this 'priesthood' would be self-selective over time."

I was amazed. At first I thought we could make a dance consisting of several myths and legends. I even imagined us inviting the Department of Energy to come and select one for their stated purpose. As we worked on the dance, however, other structures and possibilities emerged.

I was encouraged, in our early explorations, by the intensity of the dancers' commitment to the project. The people who choose to work with me, are drawn to the process in part because of the subject matter of the dances. Over the course of the years, we have made dances about the defense budget, Russian history, Three Mile Island, and also very personal works about moments in our lives. The dancers have an opportunity to immerse themselves in the subject matter with differing degrees of emotional and intellectual commitment. But with "Atomic Priests", I felt that everyone was eager to get thoroughly involved. I think this was partially due to the overwhelming notion of time as outlined in the report, the audacity of the government's ideas, and the feeling that most audiences would be outraged at the information.

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Illustration by Lincoln Cushing

Weaving the Web of Multiculturalism

At The Foot Of The Mountain (AFOM), the oldest professional women's theater in the country has, for the past eleven years, created groundbreaking original works, (*Junkie*; *Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down*; and *Haunted By The Holy Ghost*). Martha Boesing served as



The cast from the At the Foot of the Mountain production of *Story of a Mother II*. Left to right — Sherry Blakey Bunai, Bernadette Cha, Rebecca Rice, Carmen Rosario, Toni Maher.

principal playwright and guide for the company-created works.

For many years, the theater represented a white feminist perspective. In the early 1980's, the company began to realize that they had a responsibility to reflect a larger cultural landscape and to incorporate in their vision the dreams and struggles of women of different ages and races. To this end, in 1984, AFOM began to focus on supporting and producing works that reflected an anti-racist/ageist perspective. The Coming Of Age Project produced plays by young women (*The Girls Room* and *Just Clowning Around*) and older women (*The Ladies Who Lunch*). Spiderwoman Theatre shared stories and songs of Native-American culture in *Sun, Moon And Feather*. Multi-media Cross-cultural Alliance of Women sponsored *Broadcloth* and brought to light works of women of color in many artforms. Accompanying this process, the theater secured funding to do in-house work on racism, with a special set of workshops for the white women to look at their own racism, as well as institutionalized racism. In order to actualize this process even further, it was decided that the theater would work toward developing a full-time resident company that would be comprised of women of color, the first company of its kind in the country.

In July, 1987, after a nationwide search, the cast was assembled. It consisted of five women between the ages of 27 and 60, who were Asian, Black, Puerto Rican, Native-American, and White. The company had only a one year commitment to revive, re-work, and tour two previous plays that had been considered AFOM classics, *The Story Of A Woman*, and *Raped: A Woman's Look At Bertolt Brecht's THE EXCEPTION AND THE RULE*. On paper, the project promised

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We had several opportunities to show our work as it progressed, and I discovered that what was true for the dancers was true for the public. I was struck by how compelling the subject was to everyone, regardless of political persuasion or point of view. Everyone seemed challenged and focused on the issue. Invariably, during the discussions that followed our informal performances, the first question asked was, "Is it true?"

Making "Atomic Priests" raised some of the same aesthetic questions that always seem to accompany my work. One is structural: how to move back and forth between the specific, literal issues of narrative, and the more abstract, sometimes emotional or moody underpinnings of the dancing sections. (This is already an oversimplification of the problem, since in my dances the idea of the narrative itself might be simply one single image which is repeated in different contexts to carry forward the "story".)

I find that I am increasingly drawn to a world that is very clear and literally describable. But at the very moment I am defining that image on the stage (or seeing it around me) I become aware of vast shiftings of nuance, feeling, forms: things that I would call more abstract, but are still very real to me. I am personally comfortable in these mutually existing realms. In fact, I suspect that it is my dance training that has given me the firm convictions that both (and probably many more worlds) coexist. After all, in the dancing we are extraordinarily concerned with very specific sequences of the

body while at the same time working to express some other concept.

Still, what has sometimes eluded me in the choreography is the means of giving the audience enough clues to skip from one realm to the other, at the same time as the dancers do. I suspect that sometimes it's fine if they don't. But I have discovered that confusing an audience on this level is neither fun nor useful. I continue to question just how much "laissez faire" on the part of creators towards their audience's reactions is a matter of contemporary art party line, a lack of true point of view, abdication of responsibility to our own ideas or just plain exhaustion. However, just to cover my back, I would say it is very possible to build images that have the potential for more than one interpretation (even when we, the image-makers, are very clear on our own meaning).

A second recurring question for me is informational. How much do I tell literally? This problem plays itself out over and over, with both movement and language issues associated with it. For example, how much of the report do I want the audience to hear? It is tempting to quote a lot, because the report is so outlandish, funny, terrifying, and unbelievable. But it is preferable to quote less and invoke more, thereby encouraging people to write the Department of Energy for their own documentation to fill in their understanding? For me, as choreographer, there is always the question of how much movement an audience can take in and hold, when they have seen enough, and when it is time to manipulate what they have already seen so that I can move them to

a new place.

I must admit, I like these problems. They are at the heart of finding ways to communicate. To me, one of the ironies of this particular project is the notion that the government is trying to figure out how to communicate for 10,000 years to a vast number of people with an unknown cultural life, and I am trying to figure out how to communicate for 45 minutes to a small group of people whose lives I might pretend to understand.

My friend, sculptor Ed Love, once said to me during one of our long conversations about symbol, community, and abstraction: (This is paraphrasing and I hope I am doing it justice.) Here's the problem. In primal cultural communities, everyone knew the symbols, and what they meant. That way, an artist could manipulate the communal images and bring new life and meaning to them. We have few recognizable symbols, except perhaps corporate logos. And so, we artists must invent them, produce them, introduce them, manipulate them, and personalize them, all at the same time. What fun!

Liz Lerman, a dancer and choreographer, is the founder and artistic director of *The Dance Exchange*. Lerman's belief that dance is a birth-right for everyone led to her work with senior adults and the formation of a company of seniors, *The Dancers of the Third Age*. Liz Lerman/Exchange is a multi-generational company which combines dance with realistic imagery and spoken words.



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of the "solutions" seem to work for very long. Only by willfully maiming mind, spirit, and body can faith in the system be perpetuated. It is at this juncture then, that the realm of culture becomes increasingly the arena where the action is located.

Culture is the place where people instinctively come for rejuvenation. True, our instincts in this regard have become somewhat atrophied by consumer society. We are taught to consume our way out of every jam, including cultural malaise. Yet we can't seem to buy our way out of this one. After the orgy of consumption subsides, we are still left with a hollow in the pit of our stomachs. For some of us, this combines with the hollow already there from the lack of adequate food or shelter or the fear that this will soon be the case. For others, it is the inescapable emptiness that even middle class affluence cannot vanquish. It is the worm in the apple of the American dream — the worm that pesticide sprays are supposed to destroy for consumers. Yet the sprays themselves are dangerous to our well-being.

The challenge is to create a culture which allows us to see the horrors of the destruction of the earth, of fellow creatures, of our own hearts and bodies and still somehow to avoid hopelessness and cynicism. Given the seemingly overwhelming odds against changing the course of events, optimism does not seem logically possible and so we turn to feed our spirits in the realm of art, beyond conventional logic. The solution is to celebrate cultures which sustain us in hope and health and growth even as we recognize and work to heal sickness and stagnation in society as cultural activists.

At *ImaginAction III*, we'll be looking at the struggles and solutions of the 80's as we simultaneously imagine together the possibilities for the next decade. The synthesis of our experiences and our philosophies, of our histories and our plans, of our personal insights and collective consciousness is our work and our play as we become more liberated people. Your contribution is important. Come, share your knowledge and dreams, and reap the benefits of collective imagining. Our national conference is our celebration and our strengthening. Join us there. *ImaginAction!*



"Song of Unity," Victor Jara detail, painted in Berkeley, La Penã Cultural Center by Commonarts (Ray Patlãn, O'Brien Thiele, Osha Neumann, and Anna de Leon), 1986 version.

IMAGINAC

Many Local Organizations Helping Plan '88 Conference

How do you organize a national Conference in a community where almost no one has heard of the sponsoring organization? That was the problem ACD faced when we decided to hold *ImaginAction '88* in San Francisco, home to a grand total of eight ACD members. The solution was to form a small conference planning committee which was composed of community cultural organizations with high visibility and integrity, so that from the beginning the event would be designed to meet local as well as national needs.

After a lot of discussion and a few misses, the ACD conference planning committee was fortunate to get the active participation of the following groups:

Citicentre Dance Theater, (formerly Everybody's Creative Arts Center) 1428 Alice St., Oakland, CA 94612. CDT is one of the leading multi-ethnic dance organizations in the western U.S., dedicated to the revival of the tradition of Black American dance. Founded in 1977, its programs include a 10-member professional resident dance company, a dance training program which has enrolled over 5,000 students, and a Dance Outreach Program which brings performances and workshops to county schools with low-income student bodies. CDT has a 4,000-square-foot studio/theater in Oakland's new Alice Arts Center.

Galeria de la Raza/Studio 24, 2851 24th St., S.F., CA 94110. Since its inception in 1970, the Galeria has served as one of the Bay Area's most innovative and enduring exhibition spaces for Chicano/Latino visual art. The Galeria mounts 8-10 shows a year, presents occasional workshops which are related to the exhibits, and maintains a small shop which provides both an outlet for local artists and support for the operation of the gallery. The Galeria is very committed to meeting the cultural needs of the community, and has a very active community advisory board as well as close working relations with other organizations in the Bay area.

Keamy Street Workshop, 548 5th St., S.F., CA 94107. KSW was formed in 1972 to serve the Chinese American community through the arts. Since its formation it has provided a base for Asian American artists to not only teach their skills and encourage creative expression with the larger Asian American community, but also to develop a social consciousness and to orient their work toward the improvement of community conditions. Its first home was in the International Hotel, which became the focus of a nine-year struggle for community control of low-cost housing.

Workshop activities include historical archives, poetry readings, film showing, community art exhibits, cultural exchanges, and poster and mural production.

La Penã Cultural Center, 3105 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley, CA 94705. La Penã was founded in 1975 by North and South Americans to provide a place where people could learn about the culture and social conditions in other countries and where community groups could organize political and cultural programs.

La Penã is a unique bilingual, multi-cultural community center





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which presents more than 200 local, national and international music, theater, dance, film and visual artists each year whose works examine contemporary social issues. They sponsor a bilingual community chorus as well as free music and art classes.

Redwood Records Cultural and Educational Fund, 6400 Hollis St., Emeryville, CA 94608. RRCEF is the non-profit organization formed by singer/activist Holly Near and Redwood Records, Inc. in 1982 to coordinate the non-commercial educational and organizing work that is part of their commitment to peace and justice. Projects over the past five years have included support for U.S. tours by representatives of the New Song Movement, producing a panel discussion and cassette documentation on "Surviving the 80's", and a demonstration project on making events accessible to the hearing impaired. Their current projects include publishing a guidebook on concert production for grassroots organizations, efforts to reverse the INS action which may prevent international artists from performing in the U.S., and producing an album of progressive music for children.

The Women's Building, 3543 18th St., S.F., CA 94110. Purchased in 1978 by members of the San Francisco Women's Centers, this 4-story facility was the first women-owned and operated Women's Building in the U.S. It provides low-cost office space for several women's organizations, serves as a bilingual information and referral center, and sponsors a wide range of women's projects including the first battered women's shelter on the west coast, Mother tongue Reader's Theater, workshops for lesbians of color and lesbian youth, and Sistah Boom (a women's percussion ensemble).

Lincoln Cushing is a graphic artist and the ACD board member responsible for co-ordinating *ImaginAction III*.



Illustration by Nita Winter



Galeria De La Raza

ImaginAction III Hotline

ImaginAction III is shaping up as an exciting and provocative sharing celebration. We will hear of the first fruits to be gathered from our Bill of Cultural Rights. We will examine the progress we've made in imagining and living a commitment to multi-cultural and multi-ethnic respect. We will meet in workshops, cabarets, and face-to-face with artists, organizers, writers, and administrators from around the country working with constituencies like our own and on issues of personal interest.

As we go to press, workshops are being planned to address Multi-cultural/Multi-racial work, Cultural Rights and Policy, Labor and Culture, Cultural Apartheid, Women's Culture, Men's Culture, Internationalism and Solidarity Work, Rural Cultural Development, Cultural Administration, and others.

ImaginAction III will be held February 19 - 21, 1988 at:

The Women's Building
3543 18th St.
San Francisco, CA 94110

For information, contact Eleanor
Walden, (415) 848-6397.

International Correspondence

A fascinating little publication has begun to appear out of England called *Open Letter*. Its subtitle is "International Correspondence About Community-Art-Culture-Democracy." As the first issue says, "The way people can get hold of it is to subscribe. A subscription to the next six issues (i.e. issues 2 to 7) costs 3 pounds if you're Britain and 5 pounds or the local equivalent if you are anywhere else. Send cheques or money orders to Mediumwave, Unit 405, Brixton Enterprise Center, 444 Brixton Road, London SW9 8EJ, England."

The booklets are each 8 1/4" x 6", double columned. The whole idea is to write specific letters to specific people about specific concerns, and then have these published periodically so that the correspondence can be shared among many more cultural workers who share similar concerns. To date the main focus has been on *The Manifesto: Culture and Democracy*, published in 1986 by Another Standard. However, the format is truly open, so letters can be sent on any topic.

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Weaving the Web

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to bring into reality an idea that is long overdue: That women of color have a forum to claim their right to a visible and tangible voice in the theater community. However, the project throughout was fraught with surprises and problems which culminated (after only three months) in the cancellation of most of its planned activities and the resignation of Phyllis Jane Rose, artistic director and principal designer and fundraiser for this project.

Of course, the first questions that leap to mind are, what happened and why? To adequately address these questions requires more space and time than is possible here. In a situation like this, there are at least as many levels and dynamics as there are people involved. But, some statements can be made.

The project was plagued with short-sightedness and an all too typical bent for "getting the job done", emphasizing product rather than process. This ignored and prevented the valuable cultivation of community contacts and resources. The company existed in virtual isolation with none of the earlier reported work on racism in evidence.

It was also surprisingly naive that the directors felt that two scripts developed and written by white women could, with some measure of adjustment, simply be recast using women of color. The time needed for education, investigation, contemplation, and generation was not built into the structure of the project. Our diversity of theater experience, cultural experience, age, and philosophy became divisive rather than celebrative.

Another major factor that was not taken into proper consideration was that the theater was also undergoing an administrative transition that would install Nayo Barbara Watkins as the new managing director. Here again, time and care were not taken to properly focus on the important issues that were being raised as a result of that change.

Ms. Watkins, a veteran of the Free Southern Theater and an artist in her own right as well as an administrator, cautioned that as women, who have not had much power available to us, we must constantly monitor how we define, structure, and utilize it. We are constantly confronted with the white-male power model, in which you are judged by your production and in such a system the value of the human being is lessened. We can easily fall into the trap of systematizing and institutionalizing structure too soon, thereby arresting the possibility of a flexible atmosphere that allows for shifting conditions and the influx of new energy and personnel. An additional danger exists when egos become invested in inflexible systems. As Ms. Watkins has put it, "The degree to which people are invested in that institutionalization is the degree to which they have experienced pain and conflict." Thus, energies and skills were wasted rather than shared and channeled.

In this pressured atmosphere, in-fighting and factionalism cast us into that troublesome gray area between the political and the personal that is characterized by hot-blooded, name-calling accusations and emotionalism that can accompany those meetings on race and class that we have all come to dread. Personal issues can often obscure a proper examination of these larger issues unless they are acknowledged and brought into the examination process. Martha Boesing reminds us that, "Feminism taught us that personal growth must accompany political change". If the personal issues can be adequately worked through, then that same process of problem-solving will smooth the way for approaching seemingly tougher issues, like racism.

But, this takes time, trust, and receptivity. These elements are usually eliminated when power becomes centralized and the production mentality is in force. Clearly we all participated in and suffered from this frame of mind which dictates that "the show must go on". When the leadership did not take action to alleviate the physical and emotional stress this caused, then the members of the company had to initiate a work stoppage in order to alter the working conditions.

A production mentality and multi-culturalism make strange bedfellows. The honest desire on the part of those in power is to give visibility and accessibility to those who do not have the resources to make their work more visible. But, when power and control are not shared, the result is a missionary-like consciousness. For Ms. Watkins, it con-

pires up an image of "flowers in a beautiful flower garden", where those who can afford to, come and watch and say, "Oh, look at the beautiful multi-colored flowers we grew!". No one wants to see trouble in paradise. The trouble is that communities of color are increasingly suspicious of showpiece projects that simply employ one or two representatives of that community to do a production that speaks to one or two of the issues they are struggling with.

Coming to an intersection where power is shared is another prickly area. What we have seen happen all too often in situations where organizations attempt a transition from being predominantly white to becoming multi-cultural is the phenomenon of "white flight". The organization is left in disarray and the newly infused people of color are expected to re-envision and re-design an organization that they were not a part of creating.

I now have deep reservations about the viability of these attempts and it raises the question of who really benefits from multi-cultural work? The energy that is tapped in trying to bring people of color into white organizations often (as was true in this case) removes those people from their communities and puts them in the position of representing and/or fundraising for an organization that cannot directly benefit them or their community. In this atmosphere of denial and near-exploitation, discoveries about new ways of working together are never made. As a result, when these projects break down, those involved retreat behind racial lines and are reluctant to participate in multi-cultural work again.

At the Foot of the Mountain has had a tumultuous history and it should be recognized that this is not unusual for organizations that try to keep their fingers on the pulse of social change. But, through all of the changes, the theater has continued to produce powerfully effective works of art, the latest being *Story Of A Mother II*, created by the present company in collaboration with Martha Boesing. It has been critically acclaimed and widely attended, demonstrating once again AFOM's uncanny ability to resurrect itself in the midst of its own ashes.

There are many crucial questions to be explored before the next rebirth can be affected. But, ironically, the processes that have been employed to dismantle the current project are the very processes that should have been used to initiate it. We are talking about dreams, needs, skills we have and skills we need to develop, resources we can utilize and how to bring forth works of women of color and white women who have not received the theatrical exposure they deserve. We are talking about establishing playwrighting workshops to generate new scripts, sponsoring seminars and workshops on racism, multi-culturalism and how to create a theater that is a vital organ of the community, while maintaining strong artistic standards. This may necessitate a shift away from high visibility showpieces in order to do the invisible work of weaving the web that will lay the foundation for exciting new artforms that can be called truly multi-cultural.

Rebecca Rice is a member of the board of the Alliance for Cultural Democracy, a founder of Human Bridge Theater, and a member of the resident performing company of AFOM. This article was written by Ms. Rice in collaboration with the current staff and performing company of At The Foot Of The Mountain.

ACD BOARD ELECTIONS

will be held at the 11th annual ACD conference in
San Francisco, February 19, 20, 21, & 22

If you are interested in serving on the board please submit
your name, info about yourself, and why you would like
to serve on the ACD Board to:

Alliance for Cultural Democracy
P.O. Box 2478, Station A
Champaign, IL 61820
DEADLINE: January 31, 1988

Teaching Cultural Democracy



Culture is the sea in which art swims, and that sea is itself not a static thing but is alternately turbulent and calm. In this sense, artists can be viewed as the cultural workers who both navigate that sea and help create its waves or doldrums. In the traditional art course, the artist is often romanticized as the tormented genius whose "close to the bone" existence in his/her (usually his) garret divorces him/her from community ties so that "high art" is created through the magic of bourgeois individualism. On the other hand, to teach art within a cultural democracy paradigm involves an exploration of the ideological and cultural underpinnings of art (i.e., the sea) and an examination of past and present manifestations of both oppositional and generative artistic endeavors. Moreover, it posits the question of what art would be like in a world of social justice.

Most of the students in the class I teach, entitled "Cultural Democracy," are not art students and most are from working class backgrounds. In fact, very often they come into the course mystified by the very idea of art in class society. The story that they have been told over and over again is that what favorably distinguishes a work of art is its inscrutability to the lay person. Its artistic (and commodity) value increases with the obscurity of its references and the ambivalence of its meaning. These students then expect not to understand art because it is above them, and they will often preface their statements in class with the words, "I really don't understand art, but. . . ." In essence, they have accepted an elitist conception of artistic quality. The acceptance, however, is not total. In fact, they really don't believe it deep down in their gut. So, while they may reflexively spew out the mystified notion of art with which they have been inculcated, they simultaneously resist it mightily in ways in which they themselves are often not fully aware.

It is exactly upon this contradiction that the crux of the course is built. As we go deeper into the meaning of cultural democracy, there is often a visible sigh of relief on the part of some students who feel empowered by the validation of their intuitive response to "high art," while others get increasingly more threatened because they are having to examine some underlying premises about their concepts of "taste" and "quality" which in turn challenge their assumptions about both culture and democracy. For some, it is more than they bargained for when they enrolled in the class.

Taking our analogy of the sea and bringing it back to dry land, cultural democracy can be seen as challenging the societally acknowledged superiority of "high art" by returning art to its community roots and, in this way, grounding it in culture. Culture then is understood not just as a system of signs and meanings. As Deborah Langerman recently put it in *Open Letter*, ". . . The word culture, when implying activity, can and should be used as a verb, springing from the same roots as the word *cultivate*: to tend to the growth of something." Culture then is not a static entity and is not limited to a dead heritage which must be conserved and transmitted. Rather, culture is always in the process of becoming, and the emphasis of the movement for cultural democracy must be upon making it more participatory rather than more spectacular. The existence of ACD, it might be added, enables students to see cultural democracy as a new social movement composed of artists and cultural workers who have a radical understanding of form and content. Rather than having the concept of cultural democracy become just another static entity in the cavalcade of academic schools of art or merely another trendy style, one can begin to understand it as part of the search for praxis.

Since this search begins with a critique of everyday reality, we usu-

ally spend the first session together talking about shopping malls. We start with the way in which people in the class experience shopping malls and ultimately try to understand the connection between the malling of North America and the malling of culture into its lowest common denominator, consumerism. We find in these shopping malls goods that were not always merely components of a cash nexus, and this is instructive in terms of comprehending the way in which art has been removed from communal culture and sold back to us in commodified form. Similarly, as shopping malls are increasingly promoted as cultural centers, we find that our concept of culture itself has not only been diluted and degraded into a series of products for sale by people who typically have had no hand in personally producing them, but that the place in which they are sold is in turn being sold to us as the focal point for what is left of communal life.

It is at this juncture that positing "cultural animation" as an alternative culture-building approach can be useful. A "cultural animator" (or "cultural development" worker) works directly in the community as a catalyst or midwife in facilitating people's awareness of culture as something we ourselves make rather than something we have (i.e., a possession). This realization can enable people to appreciate and take responsibility for fostering their own cultural rights. "Cultural animation," like Freirean education,* involves the articulation of a community's problems and aspirations as an impetus to culture building and so avoids the debilitating "democratization of culture" approach of importing a foreign elitist culture from outside for community uplift as an alternative to mass culture. The cultural democracy model then allows us to pose a very important question. Does the right to culture take precedence over the "right" of business to use the marketplace to guarantee a commanding perch for "high art" in the cultural firmament and commercial art in our consciousness?

Cultural democracy initiatives then can serve as linkages in uniting those "unrepresented" by culture with those artists whose work has "disappeared" either indirectly by the homogenization of commodified mass culture or by direct political intervention. Furthermore, the approach of cultural democracy seeks to encourage self-determinism by facilitating people's contact with their own creative capacity as makers of culture rather than mere consumer/spectators and by providing them with self-confidence in their creative abilities and access to the tools of cultural production. Finally, an underlying assumption of cultural democracy is that North American culture is not a "melting pot," but rather a bubbling, multi-cultural stew of ethnic, political, regional, and tribal groups and that, at present, partly because of the combined minority status and subordinate position of many members of these groups in North America, some of the most interesting and powerful cultural undertakings are oppositional in nature. In a complimentary way, the generative and prefigurative qualities of "cultural animation" are then pointed to as going hand in hand with the politically engaged cultural endeavors of activist artists whose concerns range from domestic inequality to "cultural imperialism" in the Third World.

Students are asked as a final exercise to write a bill of cultural rights for the United States with the first draft of ACD's own Bill of Cultural Rights used as a starting point. They are also encouraged to do activist community projects that involve them in applying the values and ideas of cultural democracy in the "real world." While bills of cultural rights and exercises in cultural activism do not by themselves change the world, they can offer evidence of resistance to oppression and testimony to alternatives in the present, thereby helping to create a climate for social change in the future.

* A useful new book on Freirean education is *A Pedagogy For Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* by Ira Shor and Paulo Freire (Bergin and Garvey, 1987).

Ron Sakolsky is a "cultural aggravateur" who presently teaches a course in "Cultural Democracy" at Sangamon State University in Springfield, Illinois. This article has been published previously in somewhat different form along with another article by Deborah Langerman in the 1986 "Art and Politics" issue of *Issues in Radical Therapy* (Vol. XII, No. 3).



Day Of The Dead

"Dia de los Muertos" altars are the traditional Mexican way of honoring friends and relatives who have passed away. This altar announces the untimely demise of *Community Murals Magazine*. After a decade of being published in the Bay area, it has been cut off in the midst of a vigorous, creative, socially-engaged life. The November 1987 issue is the last.

Sadly the death of *CMM* is only the most recent instance of a progressive publication passing away for lack of financial resources. Publications which favor the way ruling class interests try to marginalize our lives and our art continue in good health, while many efforts of working class poor and community-based groups have passed away. The *CMM* altar also includes other leftist and community arts publications that have died, such as *Seven Days*, *Osawatomie*, *Grenada*, *San Francisco Arts Bi-weekly*, and *Towards Revolutionary Art*.

Still, the spirit of community arts lives on. The creative efforts of people working in neighborhoods, clubs, schools, and union halls throughout the world persist. We **will** have art in our communities and it will be **our** art. Even today gestation of future publications has begun, supported by our passion for art and knowledge.

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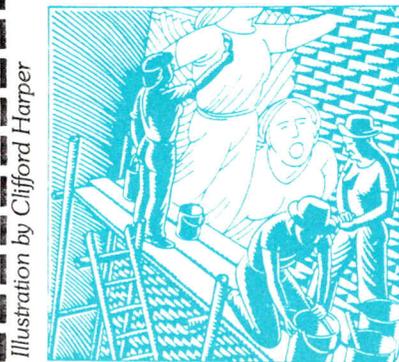


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