

Why the Arts?  
Erith Jaffe-Berg  
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My thanks to Associate Dean Georgia Warnke and Dean Stephen Cullenberg for the invitation to speak in this forum. Today's talk is much enriched by last week's presentations given at the "why the humanities?" event. Even though those presentations preceded today's attention to the arts, the presence of the arts was palpable last week in the many references to poetry, drama and "performance" and in the importance of the imagination and of shared communities of thinkers, which resonated through so many of the talks.

Cornel West reminds us: whereas "we often appeal to an abstract humanism and faceless universalism that refuse to confront the concrete conflicts that divide us" the public spaces the arts have recourse to trouble, engage and complicate in order to "explor[e] the possibilities of human choices in an urgent crisis that yields limited options."<sup>1</sup> In the performances of Anna Deveare Smith West finds a compelling exemplification of such exploration. We may equally find it in the work of American playwrights Suzan Lori-Parks and Tony Kushner, as well as in the work of the Italian writer, actor and political satirist Dario Fo, who broke boundaries not only in the content of his performance but in his symbolic acknowledgement as a producer of a corpus of work relevant enough to garner him the 1997 Nobel prize for literature. Closer to home, I find the use of theatre as a form of critical and creative inquiry in the community-based performance work of my

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<sup>1</sup> Cornel West, "Foreward" in Anna Deveare Smith, *Fires in the Mirror*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1993). xvii-xviii

colleague, theatre professor Rickerby Hinds in projects he initiates with his students and transposes to various sites on and off campus.

When art is taught in the university it constitutes critical reflection. It opens up the imagination and the creative process of students (who are always teachers) and teachers (who are always students), enriching different research fields by conducting interdisciplinary discourses. In academia, art also has the important function of enacting a cultural laboratory, allowing the arts to negotiate future possibilities for culture. While Horace, Scaliger and Robertello found in art a pedagogical tool for making ideas more concrete by their visual and kinetic representation, art making is itself an enactment of knowledge. At the same time, the very practice of teaching art making to students, especially in the collaborative creation of art with students, exemplifies a deliberative form of pedagogy that both demonstrates the efficacy of art as a tool in pedagogy and challenges the hierarchies of learning that are often assumed.

We often are reminded of what is important to us, valued and shared in art. And equally, in the experience of art works we contest our values, dispute how “shared” they are, and confront the allegiances and conflicts that shape us and separate us. Therefore, the arts are never just repositories for ideas but active living praxes of speculation and dissention. As sites of our own making and unmaking, the arts are always recyclable and sustainable in our lives because their energy is not expended but invested -- in our connectedness with others.

Last week, as I was thinking about this presentation, I had the news on and saw the twenty year commemoration of the 1989 Velvet Revolution lead by the Czech playwright Vaclav Havel. This was a reminder of the intertwined relation of the arts and politics, this potential relevance as a space for connecting often new thresholds of possibility. I thought to another Czech playwright, this time one who spent most of his life in Britain – Tom Stoppard. In his response to Communist suppression in Czechoslovakia Stoppard designed the play *Dogg's Hamlet, Cahout's Macbeth* as an experiment in which he presents the possibility of teaching an audience – within the duration of a performance. . . another language. In this experiment, the arts function as a stage for envisioning utopian possibilities. Art becomes a speculative space for teaching and testing such ideas in a public and social forum.

Art is a site of “making and unmaking “ – Creating spaces both actual and imagined, making interventions into our lives, our politics our culture. It is an expression of our personal experience as well as the potential of the arts to intervene, enact change in our lives, both political, cultural and personal. It's the fact that Vaclav Havel – one artist -- introduces another Joan Baez in 1989 and again in 2009 to commemorate another type of revolution, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia. It's the capacity of art to bring communities together and at the same time the way that art embodies and yet does not explain or pretend at total transparency in translation.

Despite the fact the arts are often rightly viewed as the result of tremendous efforts and energies, rehearsal, practice and craft, they nonetheless are essential in making visible

and experienced what is otherwise left tacit, in the realm of the intuitive, spontaneous and imagined. A work of art not only catches us by surprise, overwhelms and “stops us in our tracks” but often articulates is otherwise inexplicable. And, in the production, the arts shape not only the lives of those who produce and participate in them but cultivate the well-being of others who come as audience, and at times through accidental trajectories, to share the passion of our own lives.

“Entertain conjecture of a time” Shakespeare has his chorus say to the audience during the climactic battle of *Henry V* but importantly he opens that line with “now.” “Now entertain conjecture of a time,” purposefully troubling the notion of a far-away, imagined conjecture of another time by situating his audience and performers in the “now.” The round vowel sound – “ow --inhabiting us in a long duration of the utterance, marking time and suggesting the space it will take for our imagination to transport present to past and imagined to present. “Now” encompasses the audience and harnesses us to the task of collaboratively creating along with the production team an imagined “now” that will take into account the “conjecture” of the fictional and the “real” of the present. And “now” is reconstituted with each artistic articulation, with each performance and interpretation. In this way the arts concretize analysis and interpretation in a way that mirrors processes of learning in other disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For example, Scaliger writes: “the end of poetry is not imitation, but rather delightful instruction by which the habits of men’s minds are brought to right reason, so that through them man may achieve perfect action, which is called Beatitude” Julius Caesar Scaliger, *Poetics*, in Marvin Carlson, *Theories of the Theatre*, 46.