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FPIF Commentary

The Politics of Imagination

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The World Social Forum's greatest achievement is its continued existence as a modified open space, an open space for people with an opposition to neo-liberalism, in other words, an opposition to the corporate (and military) model in which capital, instead of people, is the organizing principle of public institutions and societal structures.

One of the disappointments (read Challenges) of the WSF for me has been an as-yet-unrealized meaningful relationship to artists as a sector in building another world. Now, there is a long tradition to this chronic potential: while artists are always invited to participate in activist events and campaigns, it is usually as providers of the entertainment or the leisure activity once everyone else has done the thinking and planning. And even then, the art works invited to entertain are usually those with directly political forms or messages.

Progressives have had a hard time understanding that artists themselves – distinct from what they produce -- have enormous potential in the actual process of imagining another world and are remarkably adept at creating new ways such concepts might actually be realized. Simultaneously, progressives have had a hard time understanding the value of art that isn't overtly political. I've had and continue to have hopes that the WSF might be a new opportunity to redress this traditional thinking. Since the space it provides makes way for imagining another world, I think it's time we began to reconsider the orientation of artists and culture in how this world might be imagined.

One of the reasons that I killed myself to get to Porto Alegre in 2005 was that, for the first time, one of the thematic terrains was given to culture where artists from around the world were able to hold workshops with each other and with activists from other fields. And there was art of all stripes fully integrated into the forum itself – not only saved for the evenings when the thinking was over. There were 400 activities scheduled on 14 different stages: 13 dance performances, 85 art exhibitions, 150 films and videos, and 100 concerts. There were 41 plays and 7 theater workshops. There was Brazil's Gilberto Gil, Australia's Snuff Puppets, and Spain's Furia del Baus. There was a debate between Spain's Jose Saramago and Uruguay's Eduardo Galeano about the relevance of the Quixote metaphor to today's activists. It was a real step forward in widening the spectrum to include artists of all sorts of aesthetics into this building of future. I now know this successful inclusion was a direct result of the incredible presence of artists at the 2004 forum in Mumbai. It was heartening to find that the organizers understood the partnership of artists in a more organic and fuller way, and had begun to understand the fullness of our ecology.

And so for the following two years, my theatre and two other companies in NYC worked to bring a delegation of artists to the WSF in Nairobi. Our delegation was 25 artists. We went to Kenya and

found practically no artists or culture whatsoever integrated into the event. In fact there were almost no local artists who even knew about the event at all. Those who did, only knew about it because of us. After spending two years to raise funds and bring this diverse delegation, I was incredibly sad to see how marginalized we were. This was most frustratingly in evidence by the fact that the artists caravan that was there -- organized with Herculean effort by a group of artists from India and South African -- was given its space outside the gates of the stadium where hardly anyone could find it.

It's hard to talk about the WSF in Nairobi and try to find a language of critique that doesn't contain this disappointment. Because I do believe in this process. Because the fact that this happened in Kenya at all is worth celebrating. In my experience it was indeed meaningful for many people who were there, especially Africans. But the outreach was noticeably narrow on all fronts -- and for us this was felt most in the lack of artists representation or cultural activities of any kind.

In terms of whether the Forum is too diffuse or too institutionalized, I think that the WSF is not diffuse enough. Since it is a public space, the primary focus for me has to be inviting more and more people and figuring out how to get them there or at least involved. While I understand the necessity of action and the opportunity that the WSF presents to constellate action, if it becomes a place *about* action, then it doesn't fulfill its potential as a revolutionary process to my mind. This is a process of citizenship building. It's the only process in the world of this scope that actually recognizes the potential in everyone for imagining and understanding their own agency in creating a different future. On top of bringing people together who are really active in this process, there's an opportunity to invite people who are not yet active, to expose them to their own agency and creativity in building another world.

I'm always asked -- because I'm an evangelist for the WSF, particularly in the art world -- where are the deliverables? I think that the deliverables are in the process itself. It's exciting for people to see that there are other successful experiments going on out there, that are so innovative compared to what we are thinking -- especially for the citizens of the United States.

We really have to continue to wide the circle. It's very hard given the exigencies of change. People are hungry now, not 20 years from now. So I understand the need to support and feed direct action. But one of the direct actions is to widen the circle. My greatest fear for the Forum is that it will capitulate to the understandably desperate need for movement-building. And that could be great. But it will also be a massive opportunity lost.

It's so easy for me to say, of course. Living hand to mouth here in New York is so much easier than living hand to mouth in Nairobi. I understand my privilege. As an art maker, I have a different relationship to results, because I make new work. It takes as long as it takes to get made. The WSF process is a great thing to be involved in together. Inviting people together to imagine a future is an entirely different kind of politics. It also recognizes the innovation that is pregnant in every living person.

This goes back to the way artists are considered in this process -- as providers. We are schooled in imagining what isn't there until it is. It's what we do. And, particularly in the theater, it's something we do collectively.

One concrete proposal, I would make is to have working artists -- especially those whose medium is collaborative (like theatre artists) -- on the International Council (IC). Every time I have this conversation about a different inclusion of artists with someone in the inner sanctum of the WSF, I know that I'm saying something that they haven't considered yet. When you're a movement builder, a grassroots activist, it's all about the to-do list. It's about concrete deliverables. And when you're an artist that creates new works collaboratively, it's about holding a protean image of what you are

making together aloft – imagining collectively what isn't there until it is.

I went to an event at the 2005 WSF that was about organizing local and thematic forums. Everyone who had been involved in organizing a forum, 40 or 50 people, each spoke for a few minutes. I asked everyone if artists had been involved in their forums. They said they had poetry readings, film festivals, and so on. I asked if there were any artists on the organizing committee. There was not one artist on the organizing committee of any country or city in the world.

I know that the U.S. Social Forum wants to organize itself differently. I think its success will be in its attention to outreach, and how widely and diversely it will bring people in. We live in a country where the to-do list is king. But for me, the success of the U.S. forum is not only about movement building.

Art alone cannot change the world – artists know this. People change the world – everyone knows this. And it's not a stretch for anyone to want a world that takes better care of the humans who live on it and the planet that's underneath them. Since the WSF facilitates a growing global conversation about what this change might look like and how it might happen, why not add artists to the table of this imagining?

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