

DEMOCRACY FOR ART FORMS AND ARTISTS

Carlton Turner

We are going to take a minute of silence.....

This is a practice I've learned after working with Pangea World Theater in Minneapolis. I've begun to incorporate it into my own creative practice, because it helps me to create a noticeable gap between moments in time, and allow space for reflection and an opportunity for me to be in the current moment. It also provides a respite from the constant inundation of information and busymaking, and helps to attune our bodies and minds for the wealth of information that exists in the silence.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Carlton Turner. I am the Executive Director of Alternate Roots, and co-founder and co-artistic-director of the performing arts group MUGABEE, which stands for Men Under Guidance Acting Before Early Extinction. I come from a family living eight generations deep in the fertile soil of Mississippi. I was born, the hybrid son of gospel-bred blues steeped in Mississippil high cotton and the echoing jazz riffs of the Harlem Renaissance. I am the second son of a holy union of uptown Harlem jazz and Mississippi catfish and collard greens, better known as Emmett Turner and Genevia Roberts. I am an indigenous Europeanized African descendant, publicly identified as "Black." I am the unintentional mixture of colonial American patriarchy and the elevated humanity of matriarchs of the global south. I am an artist, cultural organizer, creative activist, idea generator, bridge builder, husband, father, son, and most importantly, human being. I come from the land of shotgun houses and backwood church-house schools, smoked country ham steaks and organic gardens. I come from fresh milk, milk from well-fed heifers turned into butter for the fresh baked biscuits that anchored my grandma's kitchen table. I would get up some mornings and walk with my grandfather to retrieve the fresh milk that my grandmother would use to make cream, and buttermilk and butter from one batch, in a part of the ordinary ritual of my ancestors dating back to the very early days of our broken introduction to America. I come to this work through the lineage of the Free Southern Theater, Junebug Productions, the Carpetbag Theater, Roadside Theater, the Road Company, Jo Carson, Nayo Watkins, Dudley Cocke, John O'Neal, Dr. Doris Derby, Bob Moses and Kalamu ya Salaam.

This is important because I, we, are shaped by the cultures that surround us. It is our culture that helps to identify us, whether we totally understand its imprint upon us or not. We are defined by our cultures, even when these cultures don't mesh with our own identify; and when we struggle against them in the most natural ways, even that struggle is in response to our inherited culture. Culture is essential to human communication, development and health.

Even though art is part of our culture, art is not culture in and of itself. It is an identifier of the culture. When we are experiencing art, we are experiencing the culture that it comes from and is informed by. There is no artwork or performance or dance or film that is not connected to, representative of, influenced by, or preserving, culture. It is the way we learn and convey information.

Art cannot be divested of its cultural influences and purpose; so the idea of art for art's sake has very little resonance for me. Art doesn't need art to survive. Humans need art to make sense of the human condition. Art for art's sake is an attempt to dodge accountability to the cultural practices that inform and shape your art, and those practices that you are reinforcing.

The history of this nation is built upon the premise that a significant part of our society was not considered human. This was done to justify, and make acceptable, dehumanizing acts, and then codify them in the Constitution as a foundational principle for policy-making. People of color have spent their entire lives in this post-Columbus America, trying to justify our humanity, and it's all of our jobs to question, interrogate and challenge any and all institutions that were built on this foundational principle.

So, democracy. How do we talk about democracy in art forms when operating within a system that doesn't value all voices equally? A society where some voices don't have any value at all?

Well, I have to start with trying to figure out what democracy looks like to me. How does it function? As I learned from SNCC veteran, co-founder of the Free Southern Theater and mentor John O'Neal, democracy works from the bottom up, not the top down. No majority rule. It is a process that values the voice, health and welfare of all of its people. It's accessible. It's transparent. It uplifts values of equity in giving equal weight to all invested voices. If you have a stake in the outcome, then you should have access to, and a stake in, the decision-making process. It requires patience, and values listening as an essential leadership skill, because in a democratic process where all voices are heard, and are naturally endowed with power, decision-making takes longer. It's messy, often chaotic. But don't confuse chaos with disorganization. They are not the same. In nature, chaos is a generative process.

Democracy is about power. Who got it, and who ain't got it. It is about the distribution of power, versus the centralization of it. Democracy is entering a room and asking, "Who else needs to be here?" So as part of our cultural practice, we have to analyze and critique global policy-making that is tied to the acquisition and accumulation of possession and power. Art as an expression of democratic principles is a tool of reflection, refinement, projecting and manifesting the future, and a constantly evolving quest for individual and collective liberation.

So what do arts organizations look like when their development is informed by democratic principles? Well, along with the growth of American capitalism came new individual and corporate wealth in abundance, and the emergence of a new philanthropic sector that gave rise to the development of public, private and commercial arts institutions. But in the development of these institutions, artists were excluded. Artists were left outside, as structures were developed to validate the artistic form. Along with national policies that favored trickle-down economics, the arts sector has mirrored these practices with trickle-down funding and support structures for artists – practices that have created a class system across our sector. We call it the nonprofit industrial complex.

There is a need to understand the connection between democracy, public policy, access, and equity. Who gets a chance to perform on stage? Whose stories get a chance to be heard and told in public space? Who gets a chance to tell a story, and what stories get told, all impact public perception; and public perception ultimately impacts public policy. There's been a systemic underinvestment in communities that support institutions that operate outside the European dynamic. This is both a symptom of white supremacy and a tool for its continuation.

But this is not just about art. It's about perspective and practice. In 1976, as the country was celebrating its bicentennial, theater artists from across the south gathered on a hill in east Tennessee in a place where Dr. King, Sister Rosa, Pete Seeger, and Myles and Zilphia Horton once held court. On this hill they sought to create an arts organization informed by movement building and democratic process. Since the beginning of this forty year journey, Alternate Roots

has held true to being an artists organization by placing artists at the center – the center of decision-making, leadership, governance, critical thinking and fiscal management – not just as artists-turned-administrators, as an attempt to survive the economic realities of being an independent artist, but as artists using their creative practice to inform the development of organizational structure and culture. Roots is not a picture perfect organization; it is an organization practicing the messy, chaotic art of democracy – a practice that is challenged by the traditional arts sector – a sector whose most powerful and profitable contemporary elements value product over process and is always looking to create the next star, hero or leader, the next trend, in an effort to validate itself.

It's something that my mentor, Nayo Watkins, always warned me about. She would say, "Don't let them lift you out of your community, because your community is where your power is." In Roots, we invest a great deal of resources in development of strong, equitable partnerships. We see partnerships as a primary key to liberation, to investing in the development of practices that strengthen community relationships. Our impact will extend beyond any current project or grant period. Our interdependence is underplayed and devalued in a system that honors individual achievements, which is the staple of the American dream. However, the collective power of the people lies in their art and culture. The process of segmenting culture off as separate from the art, or pretending that art stands as an entity on its own, reduces community power. For me, there is no separation between how people gather to celebrate, organize or create. It's all a part of a cultural fabric that is deeper than the chase towards a production or a premier. Like Gard, we believe that by unleashing creativity at the local level, we create space for artists and community members to figure out their own way to thrive.

We understand that societal values influence the development of cultural practices. Cultural practices influence the development of cultural policy. We know that society's art will always be the most accurate index of its health. The emergence of institutions, coupled with the demise of unions and the consolidation of capital, have crippled the working class and dismantled the middle class. National trickle-down economic policies have led to an increase in homelessness, underemployment, substandard housing, poor education and mass incarceration.

Philanthropy has followed these national trends and developed its own brand of trickle-down philanthropy, and the arts community has seen this play out over and over again. This week in Dallas, Texas, local artists and small arts organizations are protesting what is being called a city-backed arts bailout of \$15 million over ten years for the AT & T Performing Arts Center which is \$95 million in debt – this in a city where only 3% of the \$21 million arts budget goes to African American artists, and a paltry 1% goes to Latino artists. You see, a country indicates what they value by where they put its resources. The arts sector has invested in the way that art shows up on the stage but in the way that it shows up in our lives or in our bodies. The art sector values the institution, but not the artist.

We value that power to name and validate, and fear the power of creativity and the chaos that lies in liberation. Our work is not transactional in nature. Our most human trait is to be able to translate experience, thought and ideas into a visceral experience for other humans to share, because our work is transformational.

But where is the accountability in our sector where those that make the decisions are not connected to the impact of their choices? The lack of diversity in spaces and places where decisions are being made is at the root of our inability as a sector and as a nation to achieve the advances in public policy that are beneficial to the larger part of society. This lack of diversity, which is too often framed as a "people of color problem," actually affects the entire society; but

when the conversation about diversity surfaces in our field, the response is usually geared toward hiring a person of color, or partnering with a culturally-specific organization to entice a particular demographic to the institution. These solutions are short-lived, and don't shift the structure of the organization enough to actually stem the root cause of lack of diversity in our institutions or share power in a way that is transformative.

So I ask you: are your institutional policies contributing to the concentrating, or the distribution of, power? The creation of the US economy is anchored on the free labor of enslaved Africans imported to this country, and bred for generations to supply a workforce that was considered the property of the ruling class. Human potential is being squandered globally by the push for economic wealth, and power over resources - resources that belong to a planet that cannot be owned, but merely momentarily occupied - being exploited in the same way that the large majority of its inhabitants are.

This is the current state of our global culture, and the arts sector is a reflection of that. We must challenge it at every turn, because it can be reshaped or transformed, and it is our responsibility to do so.

All hope is not lost. In Durham, North Carolina, Spirit House, a community-based arts group led by Black women, is working to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline by creating a harm-free zone around the local high school, when the process of criminalizing youth has become a community health issue. In Richmond, Virginia, a project called Performing Statistics is working with youth and juvenile detention facilities to create art that calls for an end to youth incarceration in the state of Virginia. In Rockcastle County, Kentucky, the Clear Creek Creative is using storytelling and folk music to engage the community in a fight against the onslaught of fracking companies that threaten their land, their health and environment. ArtsChangeUS is convening the most diverse group of artists and leaders in the country through a five-year initiative designed to reframe the conversation about the national arts identity, and make visible the great diversity that has always existed in America. Their work is creating opportunities for an old conversation to be made anew, and to gain traction again. And the Intercultural Leadership Institute, ILI, is a collaborative effort between the National Association of Latino Arts and Cultures, the First Peoples Fund, the Pa'i Foundation, and Alternate Roots, that works to provide a space where arts leadership is based on cultural traditions, personal transformation and shared history. It is designed and led by people of color, but is not an exclusionary space.

I will leave you all with this. There is a science to vision. The moment you devote thought-energy to seeing a different future, to seeing a world that doesn't already exist, you begin the artistic process of generation. Imagining the first scene of that movie or play that you want to create. Sounding out the first sentence of that poem that's in your mind. Humming the central melody of that song that appeared out of nowhere. That's vision. Artists are visionaries. The moment you give birth to an idea you have begun the process of manifesting that thing in the physical plane. We create the future with our thoughts. This is very powerful stuff, and part of the reason that artists are feared.

So I ask you: What tomorrow are you giving birth to?