

THE MUSEUM AND THE MALL: REFLECTIONS ON ART, DEMOCRACY AND COMMERCE IN A NEW WORLD OF INTERDEPENDENCE

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THE MUSEUM AND THE MALL AND THREE MEDIATING IDEAS:

On my way to the Barbican in London last year, where I addressed this subject as part of British Council 75th anniversary lectures, a cab driver asked me what I would be talking about. I said "art and politics." He was puzzled: "what's the connection between them?" Before I could speak, he jumped in: "Oh, I know: they're both useless." Well, he had a point.

Useless or not, however, anyone who shares our concerns with art and audience in a commercial culture facing a new world of interdependence has to address the relationship. As GB Shaw famously did when he journeyed to Hollywood to find out whether the myth-sized producer Sam Goldwyn might be willing to make a movie of Shaw's *Pygmalion*, Goldwyn immediately began a discourse on aesthetics. Shaw, the fabled story goes, interrupted him, saying: "The trouble is Mr. Goldwyn, you want to talk about art, whilst I have come to talk about money."

Well, talking about "art" is always dicey. And often becomes some version of talking about money. When we talk about art pure and simple, it is often as "art the object," "art the abstraction," "art the ideal." Art in the museum not art in the mall. And anything but simple.

Because that sort of art, supposedly defined by the museum but in fact installed in the mall, more often points to what art is NOT: Art that is not relevant, not actual, not funded, neither cherished nor even noticed. Because in place of THIS sort of art, posing as this sort of art – in other words, before art comes

commerce, comes entertainment, comes sex, politics, recreation, consumerism, fun, celebrity, technology, profanity.... comes profit. Everything but art – leaving the ideal, the abstraction that is art invisible, homeless, unloved. To speak of such art at all today, as Shaw knew, seems pompous, naive, banal, preposterous.

Yet still, art is, and we inevitably talk about what it is. And what it is best understood in the real world as a practice. What artists and those who produce them DO rather than what cultural critics TALK about. What art is, is indispensable, is essential, is diverse and plural and at the same time cosmopolitan and universal; is what life is, the body is, the spirit is, what **we** are – that is to say, what makes the myriad me's a "we" – an "us" – as I will argue presently, a public or a community.

Art in this sense transcends, surpasses, transforms and subverts commerce, entertainment, sex, politics, recreation, consumerism, celebrity, technology profanity and profit. To say art is about doing rather than talking is to say art is ineffable – which ought to be a hint that we stop 'effing' about it! We should not talk about art, but, being in the domain of practice, talk about practices. About practices that imagine, create, manifest, channel, emote, affect, practices that enable us to listen and see. Unlike "art," the practice of art is simple rather than pompous, knowing not naive, deep instead of banal, not preposterous but compelling. – in a word, miraculous.

What does this all mean for those who nurture and promote – that it is to say who produce and present art? Do the cultural controversies and theoretical disputes in which critics like to indulge have any relevance? You bet they do. Because these academic questions are smack in the middle of the accident-prone intersection of the museum and the mall: the intersection of art and commerce, culture and politics, performance and profit – the intersection of the playhouse, the marketplace and the House of Representatives. The producer has no choice but to negotiate the intersections and mediate the domains for that is what it means to produce.

I want here to propose that this mediation of the museum and the mall that artists but even more critically arts producers must negotiate cannot be managed successfully in the absence of intermediate – which is to say mediating – ideas. Ideas that help make the perfect practicable, the invisible transparent, the invaluable profitable. In the words of Peter Brook, help make the holy profane.

The crucial mediating ideas I have in mind, themselves intimately linked to one another, are the idea of the public, the idea of democracy and the idea of interdependence.

THE IDEA OF THE PUBLIC points to the "us" of art, to communication, community, common space and shared ground; a richer conception of audience.

THE IDEA OF DEMOCRACY points to the ideals of equality, participation and justice; and identifies in imagination a fundamental affinity between the arts and democratic life;

THE IDEA OF INTERDEPENDENCE points to the cosmopolitan, the universal, a world without boundaries or borders; a world that demands to be recognized but has been largely neglected, even denied, by the parochial and insular for whom walls are a form of security – by almost everyone except artists.

I want to focus on these mediating ideas because I think they give practical force to efforts to overcome the dichotomies of art and market, and point to useable strategies for producers and presenters– along the way also hinting at a way out of the stark dualisms I introduced at the outset about what art is and is not, art the abstraction and art as a set of practices.

But before I elaborate on the mediating ideas of the public, of democracy and of interdependence, I need to acknowledge that the dilemma in which they place us: when mediated by a robust conception of the public character of art, art's profoundly democratic sensibility, and the predilection of art for interdependence, I will suggest, the job of producing and presenting is made doable if not easy. But – and this is the "but" to which I will return – but the times in which we live are hostile to the idea of a "public," hostile to community and common goods; they are equally hostile, for some of the same reasons, to

democracy and equality; and they resist the necessary idea of interdependence with a stubborn parochialism that prefers competition to cooperation and that, as I have noted, takes comfort in walls rather than bridges.

If art is the enemy of the privatized profit-obsessed times in which we live, the enemy of inequality and the subverter of parochial boundaries, it is by the same token the victim of these very same forces. Americans and American audiences are not themselves enemies of the arts. On the contrary. But the forces governing American society, because these forces are hostile to community and democracy and to interdependence, are hostile to art. Art's continuing hold on its audiences is in a contest with the social forces weighing on those audiences. Thus art practices need not only to persist in making themselves felt thorough the production and presentation of art performances and installations. They also need to find was to demonstrate and reinforce arts affinities to the ideas of the public, the egalitarian and the interdependent. As it makes the case for public life, democratic citizenship and constructive interdependence, art practice makes a case for itself and its indispensability to the life of free democratic societies. It can transform the hostile forces conspiring to undo it.

Let me then say a few words about each of these key mediating concepts, and why they are under assault today – and what the arts can do to help lift the siege. For in helping to *create* a public – a cultural community; in helping to *imagine* equality by accessing and sublimating otherness; and in helping to *subvert* boundaries and build bridges among generations, traditions and nations, art forges the very conditions it needs to flourish. In doing so, it nourishes creativity, imagination and subversion – not only the means to these ends, but art's own chief virtues.

THE PUBLIC:

Of the three, the idea of the public is both most crucial and most at risk. Art is endemically communicative and depends on commonalities and shared ground that artists, with audiences, together create. A "cultural community" is in a sense redundant, since culture always presupposes and leads to community. A culture is collective, common, always "public" in character. In offering a creative vision, art

invites spectators and listeners to join a community. Yet the very notion of community as it is associated with public goods is under siege.

Think here of the war on "big government" which has become a veritable war on the very idea of what a public is.

Think of the attack on "public option in Obama's health care; his easy surrender early on in the debate of the term that most conspicuously manifested the democratic and open and universal character of his health plan;

Think of the recent attack not simply on Unions but on "**public** employee Unions"! The target seemed to be not so much unions themselves, but the public employees who dare organize around their vital public function and are now viewed by vitriolic media critics and anti-government campaigners as emblematic of the detested public sphere.

Think too of the resistance to taxation, a resistance to common or pooled resources, the rejection of the idea that a people have a right to pursue and fund common purposes.

And then think about the etymology of the word public in the Latin *res publica* – "things of the public" or public goods. The Republicans seem to have forgotten the root meaning of their own name. As so many Americans have forgotten what it means to live in a "commonwealth," or to be stakeholders in a "public commons." Disdaining public officials, threats of violence against them, and (as happened with Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords) actual assassination attempts is par for the course in a society that has grown so antagonistic to its own public institutions that those who represent those institutions are perceived as mortal enemies of the people they represent..

Such poisonous resentment comes naturally to a society habituated over the last forty years to the so-called market revolution: a neo-liberal ideology first purveyed as a political strategy by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the early eighties that contemned politics, disdained the state and prized privatization and the market. To Reagan, government was "part of the problem" rather than the solution, and privatization (marketization) was the solution to the problem of

government. Where in the Sixties, government had been prized as the key to a Great Society, if at times overvalued, in the Eighties it was radically depreciated. In its place, private markets were held up as ideal forms of social exchange. By the 90s, there was a bipartisan consensus on limiting government, so that President Bill Clinton could not only bring state assistance to the poor to an end ("the end of welfare as we know it"), but in his 1996 Federal Communications Act (displacing the 1934 original that had treated media as public utilities in need of oversight and regulation) could terminate federal oversight of this most precious of the public's resource – based on the argument that "spectrum abundance" meant everyone could compete equally now in the "new media" and there was no need for government regulation. As if you and I could compete put up a Facebook page and send out a twitter and compete with Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg. As if we were not spending billions in every election to buy back the airwaves that once belonged to us by right and had been leased to private corporations in our name.

More recently, the results of these anti-public biases have been evident in the global collapse of the banking system, the erosion of trust in public institutions and the perversion and transmogrification of our civic vocabulary. Citizens are now mere "consumers" or "private clients" of a nanny-style corporate state in which politicians are "service providers" and hired hands. Even President Clinton talked about how he was "hired" to do work of the people (President Obama and other politicians on both sides of the aisle continue to talk this way), though the reality is Presidents and other politicians are elected as deputies to and representatives of a sovereign people to forge common goods and common wealth in their common name. President Clinton liked to speak of "market democracy" and "democratic markets" as if the democratic state rested on the free market and not the other way around.

And so citizens, turned into "consumers," naturally came to view politics as a spectator sport, something to watch on television, government referring to an "it" or a "them." Political engagement here becomes, at best, the "culture of complaint" – clients passively making demands on government, or "firing" politicians they don't like. "Throw the rascals out!" has long been a mantra of passive citizens who don't really believe in democracy, and so blame their

representatives for the poor judgment of their constituents – often cynical about the whole public enterprise of governing. It is no longer just "us" vs. "them," it is "me and me and me and me and me vs. them." *Me* as trump. *Them* as corrupt saps, or worse. Nearly every politician today, from Jim de Mint and the Tea Party marauders to President Obama and his reluctant Party colleagues trying to find a political center just slightly to the left of the far right, ape the anti-government antics of the libertarian right. They can all be found when campaign season rolls around, fleeing from the District of Columbia in order to boast they are running against Washington. Yet Washington is nothing if not them... that is to say, us.

In a society where citizens are consumers, politicians are hired company managers and public goods are aggregated private interests, the idea of a commonwealth, a civil society, or a commons, all but vanishes. A public environment hospitable to art and its commons, an engaged audience, is replaced by a competitive marketplace where the audience is comprised by lazy spectators and unengaged critics who take no responsibility for the risks and adventures art practices necessarily require. The sole responsibility of the spectator today is to buy a ticket. Or not. Period. Art as collaborative practice dies.

With **privatization** then comes **commercialization** – measuring everything by its capacity to generate a profit. To present art is to "sell" tickets and only to sell tickets. Even though we know so many of the things we cherish cannot be reduced to their price: like religion, family, education, nature, patriotism, and of course culture. We pray, we play, we love, we reflect, we read, we listen, we see, we envision – all in ways that profit cannot capture, and certainly cannot monetize. There is little nowadays that cannot be profitably monetized from revivalist religion to "Rude Ludicrous Lucrative rap." As Dan Chiasson wrote recently in the New York Review of Books under that title, "even as rap undermines its whole demented code of money, cars, ho's, and hustlers, it markets it, markets itself." Jay-Z may be a critic, but "the critique doesn't undermine the business: it is the business." (1/13/11)

Once upon a time before the triumph of commercialism, the paramountcy of public over private space, of the 'non-profit' civil society sector over the private market sector, was evident in the very architecture of our towns. In any traditional township centered around a "commons" or public square could be found the non-profit symbols of the *res publica* and a robust and pluralistic civil society: an art gallery, town offices, a community theater, a church or synagogue or Mosque (this isn't political correctness, all three can be found on one square in today's Istanbul!), and those emblems definitive of our public lives – a public school, a public library, a public town hall, a public post office and, in England once upon a time, a public drinking establishment known as a public house – the PUB, which like the American barber shop or general store served as a public clearing house not just for gossip and social life but for public talk and civic interaction. This varied cityscape embodied finally an architectural ensemble defined by Main Street or the Public Square dedicated and catering to the public souls of commoners and citizens.

Compare these traditional pluralistic towns in which most buildings were "pubs" of one kind or another, with the monolithic mono-maniacal malls that are wholly private, the only "common" spaces in many of our suburbs and increasingly dominant in our cities too – all commercial shops, big box stores; all private use, no leafleting, no-praying, no playing, all stuff-for-sale space dedicated to one narrow and private aspect of our human nature, material consumption. Art galleries? Only when the stuff is pre-framed commercial art for sale. Theaters? Only the multiplex with its brand-permeated commercial movies, and the reality show of other shoppers. Actually the show of fellow shoppers, as William Whyte once depicted it, could be a positive public feature of shopping arcades and other such venues, but in the modern mall there are no benches to sit and watch, no diversions from the goal at hand – because that goal is to keep everyone shopping and shopping and shopping, not a minute to be lost. Even the fast food courts are pit-stops to fuel up tired shoppers for the next round of consumerism.

Privatization as commercialization leaves no room for anything but shopping. It is as totalizing, bottom-up, as Nazism and Stalinism were once totalitarian, top-down. The early models were of course far more toxic, but think about it: we say

with conviction that when **politics dominates** every sphere and, politicizes everything, takes up every nook and cranny of our lives, it is "totalitarian," the very negation of freedom. Under totalitarianism, **art is nothing other than politics by other means**. And when **religion dominates** every sphere of life and theocratizes everything, that is fundamentalism, we say that is the very negation of freedom. So that under fundamentalist theocracy, **art is nothing other than religion by other means**. Yet when **commerce dominates** every sphere of life and renders ever space commercial, what do we say? That **art is nothing other than commerce by other means**? No, we identify this bottom-up commercial totalism with freedom itself, and treat it as the ideal environment for artistic as well as civic liberty.

Given this transformation of the town and the republic into the mall, we can hardly be outraged or even surprised where art both mimics and mocks the commercial culture on which it depends by making the huge price tag on its fabrications the measure of its worth. How many artists do nowadays what the artists did last year at the Tate Modern exhibition called ever so aptly **Pop Life: Art in a Material World?** Think Andy Warhol or Jeff Koons or Keith Haring. Or consider a performance artist like Anthea Fraser, also at the Tate, who offers a video installation in which she beds and fucks an art collector on camera, one who pays \$20,000 for her and the video she makes of them – presumably about \$1000 for the sex (by current British standards) and about \$19,000 for the resulting video "art work," which in keeping with contemporary narcissism features... the buyer!

This is how modern artists, from notorious rappers to celebrated painters, try to rationalize their sell-out to commerce (who can blame them?) as a form of subversion. 'Watch as we strike a blow against bourgeois decency and thereby discredit the bourgeoisie and their commercial culture by aping their porn and raising the price on it!' So subversion and cashing in turn out quite conveniently to be more or less the same thing. So Damien Hirst, no second fiddle to Jay-Z, can stud a skull with diamonds and sell it for tens of millions, far more than the gems are worth, construing it as scabrous commentary on modern society – while it is actually only a pathetic tribute to the triumph of commerce not just over art but

over the artist. Only a few champions like Grayson Parry manage to subvert for real – as he does in a medallion he struck recently called "Born to Shop" carrying the portrait of a halo'd child and the words "Easy, Fast and Simple" (taken from my book *Consumed* where I contrast these commercial ideals with "hard, slow and complex") in order to capture the paradoxical essence of the consumerist mentality that he also embroiders into wall hangings and paints onto his exquisite vases.

The artist's temptation to buy in by selling out is for me the problem with the very persuasive arguments that have been made recently about the economic benefits of what, to my regret, now are called cultural workers. The arts are forced into playing the privatized commercial game favored by management consultants and politicians worried about reelection of proving their worth not in terms of intrinsic values and inherent meaning, but in terms of how much they "pay back financially to communities" that deign to support them! To be sure, the reality is not only that the arts help create communities, they help pay for communities as well, and they pay very well indeed. For that there is ample evidence.

At the international conference Florens 2010, a featured study showed for every \$100 invested in arts and culture, \$249 was added to the value of GDP; that every three jobs created in the arts sector yielded two more in the private sector. Statistics from Americans for the Arts show that "nonprofit arts organization and their audiences generate \$166 billion in economic activity every year and support almost 6 million jobs." And, by the by, they return \$30 billion in government revenue every year as well.

Here in New York in the new downtown ground zero neighborhood, the arts have led repopulation of residences, stores, and hotels. Our colleague in Berlin, Jochen Sandig has relived the experience of so many arts pioneers risking all in dying urban industrial districts: he has created a vibrant performance and community space called Radialsystem V in an old Berlin Pumping Station on the Spree Kanal, and has managed to turn around a dying neighborhood near the Ostbahnhof. Now he faces the prospect of developers and manufacturers and politicians rushing in to reap the benefits of his years of struggle – and if they succeed, you

can be sure he will not share in the profits or the benefits but will move on to a new urban frontier.

Artists and arts producers are urban pioneers who turn neighborhoods profitable and then too often become the homeless detritus of these now chic new neighborhood where they can no longer afford the exorbitant rents they have made possible. A few like Joe Melilo at BAM have been brilliant enough, ingenious enough, to persevere. Harry Belafonte, who refuses to go away, just forged an alliance with 1199, the Service Union, to revivify "Bread & Roses," the Union's decades-old cultural arm, little used in the last years. The real bottom-up, neighborhood arts thus come back to midtown (the Union has its own 300 seat theater) thanks to a moral and artistic pioneer who will not stop insisting that art and justice go hand in hand. But most artists move on and begin again, revitalizing still another lost locality. We have all seen the trajectory: midtown to the Village; the Village to Soho, Soho to Tribeca, Tribeca to Brooklyn, and now Brooklyn to Hoboken or Jersey City or perhaps Queens or New Brunswick, New Jersey. Restless pioneers pushed out of the neighborhoods they have made economically viable because they are deemed to be economically, well, unviable.

But non-viability is far from the truth; art really does pay back its debts, big-time. Even tea partying budget cutters have been forced to get it, so that when Republican Senator Tom Coburn tried last year to prohibit stimulus money from going to – check out this astonishing list! – casinos, swimming pools, zoos and ... yes, "artists," those extravagant big spenders who waste public money, other prudent Republicans joined Democrats to kill the amendment. They didn't mind defunding zoos and casinos but they understood that cultural institutions actual build neighborhoods, promote new jobs and fortify local and regional economies.

The evidence is overwhelming. Paul Nagle's new Institute for Culture in the Service of Community Sustainability (at my New York think tank, Dēmos) has the proof. Still it is appalling that artists and producers have to play the game at all. When Russell Bishop asks the question, in the title of his piece outlining some of the above facts, "Are We Wasting Money on the Arts?" my foolish temptation is

to say "I sure hope so!" because if we are actually earning money off the arts, it may not be art that is what is being purveyed or culture that is being served.

A crasser way to put it is that in this society we measure value by what we are willing to "waste money on" – say corporate bonuses for failed bankers or say the Pentagon's hapless wars, or say tax windfalls for the rich, or say foreign aid to countries wedded to our demise. But you can be sure institutions we patently don't care about – *public* education, *public* transportation, *public* culture – will be held accountable for every pencil lost, every public employee who dares ask for a pension, ever actor hoping to be paid a salary. In part because they are public and we no longer believe in the idea of the public. Starve the commons, bloat the private sector – and let the arts decide in which domain they want to reside. Institutions that won't privatize are slated for extinction. Britain's great state-supported universities Oxford and Cambridge, are under siege today, being told to prove their value by economic payout and research output, on the basis of "performance" standards devised by Harvard Business School and McKinsey rather than Aristotle or John Dewey or even the British Parliament.

Who can blame artists then for opting into the private market sector, where the big bucks are? But how risky this choice is. For art cannot depend for its survival on the institutions it is meant to challenge and that aim at its trivialization. Because art is necessarily risk-taking, subversive, innovative and offensive. Not always but often; not necessarily but obligatorily. If we are not troubled or exulted, discomfited or aroused, incensed or transported, we are not being touched or moved; we are not being made to see what we have failed to see before, to hear what we have never before have heard, And, sorry, that isn't quite art, whatever else it is. Schiller said long ago that when theater satisfies itself and its audience with administering a "gentle rocking of the senses," it has lost its way. Ibsen, Shaw, Brecht, Miller, heard Schiller; so has Harry Belafonte and Joe Melilo and Robert Wilson and Kevin Cunningham and Jochen Sandig and Guy Gypens. They too have heard Schiller, but it is such a struggle to keep Schiller's faith and who knows how long they can endure without becoming subservient to the commerce they must serve without abandoning the art they are fated to practice.

So yes, of course the arts benefit the economy. Because to benefit the commons, to enhance the community, to help create common goods and public space, *is* economically beneficial –which is why the current war on public space is so absurd and self-defeating. For culture to use economics as a benchmark denies its essence and blackmails it into abjuring its nature. Art loses but we lose more. Proving how well it helps pay the bills, we forget what it is for – and what we as audience need from it. Which is not to pay the bills.

Economists and politicians are the ones who should be insisting on the undeniable market value of the arts, allowing artists to insist market value is irrelevant to and destructive of what they do. Producers of course... YOU.... you have to make the case to economists and politicians and so are constrained to introduce measures as corrosive to the culture you champion as they are necessary to culture's survival! A burden your society needs to lift from you – but don't hold your breath.

Before I move on to the idea of democracy, a last word about the meaning of freedom in the neo-liberal ideology preferring private over public. We have been talked into the notion that freedom – art's condition – is private, a concomitant of *individual* action. But there is a profound if little noticed difference between private liberty and public liberty. Private liberty is really not liberty at all, but a mostly empty choice we make as individuals between options generated by others, on a menu of alternatives we do not create that frequently omits the things we most care about.

Anyone who Journeys today to Los Angeles will face the great "freedom" of more than 200 kinds of automobiles to rent, from Hummers to Bentleys, endless private choices constituting, it would seem, a rich menu of options. Except the one choice that is most important, the choice for *public* transportation, is not on the menu. It cannot be on the private liberty menu because it requires public choosing and common action to make it available as an option a all. In fact, public choices made after World War II under duress from the steel, rubber, cement and auto industries led to a once and for all public choice by Congress to build and interstate highway system instead of an interstate rail system. This in turn led to

suburbanization, to the decline of inner cities left now to the poor minorities that had immigrated from the Southland in the Thirties, led to the vast brown spaces beyond the cities which we now criss-cross on indifferent throughways and freeways, led to a fossil fuel economy that has polluted our waters, destroyed our environment and warmed our atmosphere; and, finally, which led to the seemingly marvelous set of private choices about which car to rent at LAX.

But in truth the real choices, the public choices are off the table, made long ago not really by us but by corporate interests that continue today to write the menus from which we are granted the paltry little private choices we equate with liberty. Remember the fast food chain which a few decades ago offered a menu items of items limited to reheated potato skins? The chain famously boasted "we give you freedom!" Sounds good, what freedom? "We give you the choice of toppings." The choice of toppings is clearly not freedom; for freedom is finally something only citizens can possess. The choice of toppings is what deluded consumers are talked into substituting for real freedom.

Real choice entails the ability not just to choose from a menu of choices but to choose the menu and what is on it. That is the lesson of SOPHIE'S choice – reminding us that to be cynically given a "choice" about which of your children is to be murdered is no choice at all but a form of inhumanity a good deal worse than servitude. Too many choices in our privatized world are choices without a difference, trivial versions of Sophie's Choice where there are no real options. Like what to see at the multiplex – (choice? are you kidding?) or what to watch from the strange dearth of true variety on the six hundred channels we can now receive on cable television; or the infinite banality of the web with its e-sales and endless porn and antisocial social networks, but hardly a single venue for education or civic engagement or art.

At least artists, even when they opt for the private and the commercial, do not confound that option with public liberty, as Wal-Mart does when it lowers its prices (to destroy competition) or the Bank of America does when it takes America's name in vain because it is NOT the bank of America but the bank of one

more privileged group of privatized shareholders working in a marketplace of banks that offer consumers no real choices at all.

The second crucial construct that serves and is served by the arts is democracy, closely related to the idea of the public.

DEMOCRACY:

Democracy is about equality and participation but it begins with a deep regard for the human rights that generate the ideal of equality. Liu Xiaobo, China's persecuted Nobel Prize winner, censored and shuttered by China's frightened Party hacks, has written "freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, the mother of courage and truth." Yet human rights, in theory a human birthright, is in fact a product of human association and democratic citizenship. Equality of rights is an artificial construct that depends on recognition and reciprocity. We are "born equal" in theory, but must become equal through civic activities and constitutional faith in practice. That is why Tocqueville speaks of the "apprenticeship of liberty," which he calls the "most arduous of all apprenticeships." To put it another way, equality is neither natural nor discovered but invented: it is the product of an empathetic imagination.

What ties art to democracy and democracy to art is the faculty of imagination. Citizens (real citizens not consumers) have in common with artists a capacity to envision: to see beyond apparent borders, to see beneath appearances, to see commonality where others see only difference. Citizens are common seers, women and men defined in the first instance by their distinct private interests who have imagined sufficient common ground and shared values to adjudicate those differences and, in the second instance, achieved high common purposes. Democracy's greatest ideal is equality and in the human context equality is a product of imagination. Immediate perception reveals only the distinctions of race, gender, accent, class, religion and ethnicity that divide us and turn us into a host of hostile others, dividing the world into warring tribes. Equality demands an imaginative faculty that sees through walls and beyond otherness to underlying human sameness – our cosmopolitan humanity. Lionel Trilling captured the intimacy of imagination and liberalism when he justified his own role as liberal

critic equally concerned by literature and democracy by writing "the job of criticism would seem to be, then, to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination;" in Trilling's vision, what had to be imagined was "variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty."

Turning Trilling around, what is a bigot but a woman without imagination? Someone blind to human variousness? What is a killer but a man unable to see the humanity in the one he murders? It is a backwards tribute to our imagination that we must first dehumanize those we would kill. Training warriors requires first of all the erasure of the imagination – that spring of empathy that sees in supposed enemies not "others" but beings like ourselves and so insists on a reciprocity of treatment that is the end of enmity and the beginning of justice.

The democracy I am talking about, and I will come back to this theme at the end of my remarks, is not democracy as a formal governing system but, in John Dewey's phrase, democracy as a way of life. The plural Democracy Walt Whitman limns in his *Democratic Vistas*, and which he captures in his *By Blue Ontario's Shore* (in *Leaves of Grass*) – a democracy as rich and multitudinous, as various and multivalent and paradoxical as Whitman itself:

O I see flashing that this America is only you and me,

Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,

Its crimes, lies thefts, defections, are you and me,

Its Congress is you and me

The war (that war so bloody and grim) was you and me,

Freedom, language, poems, employments, are you and me,

Past, present, future, are you and me.

I dare not shirk any part of myself, nor any part of America good or bad.

In this democracy, Whitman's and Dewey's, it is not the talkers but the listeners who define democratic life. For the precious instrument of imagination is listening

not talking. We are used to electing talkers, the garrulous lawyers and politicians, to sit and gab in our "parliaments" around the world (*parler* means talk); would that we elected listeners who took their place in *Audioments* rather than parliaments!

Sometimes listening is deemed a feminine virtue so that, for example, the so-called "ethics of care" Carol Gilligan and Virginia Held embrace is seen as a feminist takes on morals (as in Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*). Women, trained to listen and acculturated to empathetic imagination (not necessarily for the right reasons), are natural democrats. This is the sense in which art is sometimes called – excuse my gendered speech – feminine, and artists understood as seers of feminine temperament. Of course Delacroix's Lady Liberty leading the revolution is hardly a model of femininity, and I suspect the artist is less inherently female than transgendered, like the blind prophet of ancient Thebes, Tiresius. Tiresius, supreme mediator of past and future, life and death, women and men, has experienced life from the perspective of both genders, and sees how little is the difference between them, how common is their distressed humanity, how pitiable are the male and female creatures who imprison themselves in the lockup of their genders.

Art itself, we have seen, is mediator, and needs the mediating power of democracy. Art's excellence must be accessible to everyman and everywoman, a. There can be no Platonic tribe for democrats, only an aristocracy of everyone that is the provenance of public education, citizenship and the arts.

Like art, democracy must then enlist imagination to cross all boundaries. And it does so to forge common citizens despite alien identities and origins. Yet its dilemma is it has been that wedded from its birth to nationality, to sovereign nation states and a sovereign People (a *Volk* or *Gens* defined by distinctions that turn neighbors into others and allies into brute enemies. Democracy's capacity for empathy and taste for equality have stopped at its national borders. The democratic community, so free from boundaries within, has revealed in a hostility to otherness and fortified itself behind walls that shut it off from other communities and the larger community of the cosmopolis. We are Americans

because others are not, and for too many Americans today an America that can sustain itself entails an America closed to others.

This is why the third element in the trilogy of mediating ideas that sustain art – interdependence – is also what democracy today requires: the subversion not only of parochial identity in the name of common citizenship, but the subversion of boundaries in the name of global citizenship – an overleaping of walls, a building of civic bridges, the recognition of a cosmopolis that embraces citizens and artists alike.

INTERDEPENDENCE:

Interdependence speaks to democracy's parochialism and sets a globalizing agenda for the bounded localness of national republics. The term is not meant to appeal to some ideal condition, but is a description of brute facts about the modern world that make nationalism and bordered government increasingly dysfunctional. It points to a profound asymmetry between the challenges we face and the institutional solutions on which we rely for solutions. Most of the salient problems nation-states must deal with today are the products of interdependent forces issuing out of technology, crime, global markets, ecology, drugs, terrorism, immigration, financial capital, jobs and war. Radically complex and global challenges born of the 21st century are met with simplistic institutional responses born of the 17th century: nation states defined by borders and sovereignty which insist they can face alone every conceivable problem. Democratic nation-states prize their independence more highly than other states because the principle of popular sovereignty makes sovereignty tantamount to self-determination itself. Democracy *is* and demands independence!

Democracies are thus little more cooperative than autocracies, as they proved at Copenhagen and Cancun in failing to reach agreement on even minimal measures to deal with global environmental change. International organizations, so-called, are themselves creatures of sovereign states, so that the United Nations or the IMF or the WTO, like other nation-state collectivities such as the G-9 or G-20 are only as capable of common action as their least cooperative member allows. The

Security Council big power veto is in fact the implicit operating principle of all international politics.

So wedded to sovereignty and independence is democracy that, 21 years after the fall of the infamous Berlin Wall, democratic states seem even keener on building new walls than taking down old ones. Whether along the southern border of the United States, or in Israel/Palestine, or in gated communities dividing rich and poor in global megacities, or in the metaphoric walls represented by tariffs and taxes, we see walls going up where bridges ought to be being built. Yet to no avail. For interdependence is the reality, and walls may keep the parochial in but they do not keep the problems out. Asymmetry is a guarantee of failure.

When President George Bush responded to the horrendous attacks of 9/11, he acted as if we still lived in the 19th century: he went looking for some other nation-state responsible for the attacks. First Afghanistan, then Iraq, and afterwards, maybe Pakistan or Indonesia or Yemen or Sudan. But the great superpower of the United States of America was certain another state had to be responsible. It could not see that in the new world of interdependence, it was al Qaeda, a malevolent NGO with ties to no one nation, that was the culprit; and that al Qaeda was a far more dangerous and elusive foe than any rogue state could be. The military asymmetry between a terrorist NGO and a national army created absurdities such as affecting to respond to suicide bombers with B-1 bombers, attacking uniformed regiments when mobilized citizens of an alien ideology were the real opponents.

The same constrained logic is evident in the economic sector where financial capital and jobs alike operate interdependently, but the laws regulating them are both national and independent. In the global banking crisis, where a market in dubious financial instruments had become global, the crisis was treated through the ineffective ministrations of rival national banks. The trust that was lost across borders was met with measures meant to restore confidence one nation at a time. Just as, today, Europe tries to treat with defecting national bankrupts one at a time – Iceland, Greece, Ireland and who is next? Spain or Italy? Even as mistrust spreads virally without regard to any borders at all.

Similarly, in the so-called immigration crisis, which is actually a jobs crisis, nations speak of "illegal immigrants" and build physical and legal wall to stem the tide. By the laws of politics, these undocumented cross-border job-seekers are indeed illegal. But by the interdependent laws of global markets they are rational players following the laws of economics and going where the jobs are. Nothing "illegal" about them from this perspective. Immigrants are motivated by one logic but judged and found guilty by another logic. The problem is the asymmetry in the two logics – one, legalistic, political and national and the other, practical, economic and global. – leaves walls irrelevant.

The dilemma faced by democratic citizens then is how to acknowledge and respond to a world of brute interdependence when their free institutions are totally wedded to national sovereignty and bordered (and blinkered) institutions incapable of responding across borders? The solution is the abstract is simple enough: we must either globalize democracy or democratize globalization, so that we have instruments of response as interdependent as the challenges we face.

To do that, however, is daunting. It requires that we create a civic foundation for global democracy; a bottom up approach that allows citizens to think globally as well as locally – and in the face of parochial media and politicians who believe with good reason that in the political arena the spirit of interdependence will be punished rather than rewarded.

Democracy without borders requires citizens without borders, and citizens without borders must contend with the parochial consciousness that imprisons even the freest of engaged civic participant within a nation's borders. It is here that artists, those creative communicators of the imagination, have a vital role to play. For they themselves are disposed by the nature of their work to interdependence and hence to thinking across borders of every kind. And they are positioned to influence citizens and commoners in ways that extend the compass of the commons. In other words, the power of the arts in this confusing arena is that artists are naturally interdependent.

They speak with the insight of a Liu Xiaobo, (whose devotion to rights I noted above), who is a natural interdependent. In embracing rights, Xiaobo has

necessarily abjured walls. "I have no enemies," he says. "No hatred." For him, as for so many artists, "otherness" is a phantom. That is a concomitant of what it means to be an artist and to believe in human rights. Rights are both the beginning of interdependence – no rights for any without rights for all –and why artists are the preternatural vanguard of an interdependence movement: no art without imagination and the constant quest to overcome otherness.

These arguments remain relatively abstract, but there is a concrete practice associated with the ideas that I want to describe because it suggests that the arts and interdependence have affinities so natural and potent that an interdependence movement can be built around them.

Nine years ago, in the aftermath of 9/11, a group of artists and intellectuals, along with a handful of visionary religious, political and civic leaders, met under the transparent dome of the new Reichstag in Berlin and determined that the reaction to the terrible deeds of September 11th had to be more than a reactive war on terrorism. This group, which I had the privilege of leading, determined that if we could make September 12th an annual day not just of memory but of looking forward and trying to offer constructive alternatives to violence and injustice, we might be able to conjure new forms of democratic interdependence, civic, cultural and religious. Starting in Philadelphia in 2003, and continuing annually on each succeeding September 12th in Rome, Paris, Casablanca, Mexico City, Brussels, Istanbul and last year Berlin, a growing community of interdependents from dozens of nations, young and old, religious and secular, conservative and liberal, was able to convene an "Interdependence Day Forum and Celebration" that laid the foundation for a global youth summit, a sustained interdependence artists' community and a movement capable of undertaking Interdependence Day in the future in many different places. This in turn has recently allowed the launching of sustained year round civic, political and cultural activities in the name of interdependence.

Today, with a vibrant new interactive website at ***InterdependenceMovement.org*** and headquarters at the *Dēmos* think tank and policy institute in New York, and with active members in dozens of countries; with a Declaration of

Interdependence (see appendix) signed by thousands, and available in eight languages for on line distribution and underwriting; and with arts institutions and other organizations prepared to undertake cultural and artistic activities in New York, London, Brussels, Budapest, Nepal, Berlin, Los Angeles, Lagos, New Delhi as well as other cities in 2012, the ground is prepared for a new independence movement in which artists are already playing a crucial leadership role. But they are no means operating by themselves or without the engaged enthusiasm of scholars, religious leaders, business folks, and citizens – especially young citizens.

We invite all those at APAP, as well as at ISPA, which will convene in the coming week here in New York, to join this movement, as artists, presenters and above all as citizens. The work of interdependence is our work and will only succeed to the degree we make it our commitment.

WHITMAN REVISITED:

Finally, then there is uplift in the practices of art and what those practices make possible. Yet I know much of what I have said in these remarks can only seem dour and depressing, so profound are the challenges facing art; so difficult is the journey to equality, democracy, citizenship and interdependence. Can creativity, imagination and subversion become the forces of resistance we need to overcome the challenges I have described? Can we make them efficient instruments of a constructive and democratic interdependence? Can the arts become a vanguard of the interdependence movement?

Let me offer a firm YES by recalling an American spirit at once subversive, egalitarian, fearless, and interdependent – a man for whom poetry and democracy are veritable twins. It is Walt Whitman, his spirit, I want to invoke. Whitman was no lazy idealist blind to democracy's faults. I have already read you a selection from his *By Blue Ontario's Shore* which makes clear how rich and embracing Whitman's portrait of democracy was. From him we learn that ambivalence is democratic art's calling card. For Whitman, self-described in his *Song of Myself*, was "an American, one of the rough's, a kosmos, disorderly fleshy and sensual... eating drinking and breeding, No sentimentalist... Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jams!"

Surely that's the ticket for art today! "Unscrew the locks from the doors!" That's Tony Kushner or Anna Teresa de Keersmaker or Bob Wilson or Sasha Waltz! "Unscrew the doors themselves from their jams!" That's Anna Devere Smith and Ivo von Hove's startling version of Hedda Gabler! That's the old uncensored, unbowlerized Mark Twain and the new Public Theater musical "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson!"

Because Whitman's democracy was no Jeffersonian aristocracy of yeoman but a congeries of everymen and everywomen,

"the little plentiful manikins skipping around in collars and tail'd coats,

I am aware who they are, (they are positively not worms or fleas,)

I acknowledge the duplicates of myself, the weakest and shallowest is
deathless with me,

What I do and say the same waits for them,

Every thought that flounders in me the same flounders in them..."

Whitman's equality feels real and palpable and speaks today to the endless variety of America, to its now global cities, teeming as ever with immigrants who are the hardy new specimens of an emerging global civil society. For Whitman celebrates not government but society, and a pretty rough society at that. But like Tocqueville and Dewey, he understands, from the depth of his poetic imagination, that formal democracy depends on informal democracy, that voters must first be citizens. To be more than mere commands inscribed on paper, the rights Liu Xiaobo prizes must be embedded in the habits and mores of a free people. In this sense it may be that Walt Whitman's rough brief for civil society with all its abrasive edges, his equality of grittiness and sweat and sex and blood, is a firmer foundation for democracy than any written constitution. We need citizens to animate constitutions, poets as well as lawyers of democracy.

Whitman's is finally a democracy of hope, a democracy that looks forward because its history "remains unwritten," because that history has yet to be

enacted," It is a democracy that responds to terror fearlessly by refusing to yield its liberties to security or sacrifice equality in the name of surveillance and profiling.

To the degree democracy is at risk today (and democracy is always at risk), it may be because we have neglected the spirit of poetry and have marginalized imagination. Whitman knows it is not just about government. In *Democratic Vistas*, he writes:

"Did you, too, O friend, suppose democracy was only for elections, for politics, and for a party name? I say democracy is only of use there that it may pass on and come to its flower and fruits in manners, in the highest forms of interaction between men, and their beliefs – in religion, literature, colleges, and schools – democracy is all public and private life."

Like John Dewey, who insisted democracy was not a form of government but a way of life, Whitman embraced the largeness of democracy that could contain multitudes. The spirit of our own age is the shrunken, greedy animus of the imperious corporate banker and the grasping consumer. If ever America needed democratic voices, ardent dreamers and lawless artists, it needs them today. It is a moment to listen to Whitman's voice, as our forebears once listened to it in the last half of the nineteenth century. In those chaotic times, fresh from a terrible civil war and the assassination of a president, on the eve of a gilded age of robber barons, Whitman taught Americans to hear and to sing the song of democracy.

Is there a better way to think of our calling – the calling of those who would make art, produce and present art within the confines of the mall to a world craving community, equality and cooperation – than to emulate Whitman and to nurture creativity, imagination and subversion? Is there a simpler way than to sing the old song of democracy in the name of the new promise of interdependence?

END