SHAMING THE DEVIL

ANIMATING DEMOCRACY

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In memory of Jim Murray, cultural correspondent par excellence

Writers, like other artists, supposedly aspire to "tell the truth and shame the devil," as Lorraine Johnson-Coleman's grandmother advised her. But telling the *whole* truth, and telling it so well that people want to listen to it, so well that it shames not only the devil but the bigots and reactionaries, the warmongers, misogynists, hypocrites, homophobes, complacent liberals, and snobs; so that it provides the basis for social dialogue and change; so that it celebrates and uplifts the rest of us as well as shaming the devil—that's the challenge.

A defining moment in my own writing life came in 1980 as I sat at a round table in a lower Manhattan loft with Arlene Goldbard, Don Adams, and Jerry Kearns. We were discussing how to get three branches of hitherto isolated art together: community arts; street, guerrilla, and political arts; and the progressive avant-garde. The so-called high art world, even the politicized, "radical" branch of it, was thoroughly ignorant of groundbreaking work being done around the country (especially in the theatre community) and somewhat dismissive of the achievements of community-based artists working not only *with* but *for* expanded audiences, deliberately avoiding the artworld career loop. None of these groups, in turn, knew much about some bold attempts within the art world to transform and/or escape it—models buried in conceptual, performance, feminist, and some public art.

While the four of us had been involved in all three of these areas individually since the 1960s, each one of us claimed our "expertise" primarily in one of them. Don and Arlene were pioneers in the field of community arts organizations and cultural policy—a term I had never heard until I met them; Jerry was an artist, a college professor, and worked with radical urban African American and Puerto Rican groups; my activism was feminist and anti-establishment, but I made my living writing mostly within the art world. I'd had previous epiphanies in the anti-Vietnam War movement and especially in the feminist collective and journal *Heresies*. We were all frustrated by the lack of cultural policy in this country, with the limitations and presumption of art's "uselessness" in western culture and its alienation from most audiences.

Process over product was a byword in the late '60s and early '70s. (As Judy Baca said later of one of her striking community murals, "If there were no mural, this would still be art.") Even then, however, artistic excellence and socio-political effectiveness were considered incompatible—an argument that drags on today. For years we and our cohorts had been talking about demythologizing art and changing the system in which it was cooped up, about making art that was *generous* as well as critical. I called myself an "advocacy critic," working from "a communal base to identify and criticize the existing social structures, to locate and evaluate the social and esthetic effect of the art." Years later, Animating Democracy, through Critical Perspectives, asks even more of their writers, and of their process.

The "movement for cultural democracy" that was being formed at the time in hopes of precipitating a national cultural policy had its roots generally in the '60s and specifically in the late '70s with NAPNOC (Neighborhood Arts Programs National Organizing Committee). Led by Goldbard and Adams, this group was renamed the Alliance for Cultural Democracy around 1982, in the face of knock-knock jokes. Among our goals were to make avant-garde art more accessible, to sharpen the formal edge of community/social arts, to turn political art toward more complicated issues instead of settling for mere opposition. Easier said than done. Passion and pragmatism make uneasy bedfellows. Suzanne Lacy—a "social sculptor" dealing with the "*shap*e of interactions" has remarked that "the people I work with share my values but don't share my esthetics."

The Animating Democracy Initiatives are among the direct heirs to that fledgling movement for cultural democracy. Many of the same people are involved and their work has grown in the interim into a layered, sophisticated practice. Although the ideal synthesis between community, political, and avant-garde art has yet to take place (and may be just pie in the sky, thanks to the very different economic bases implied by all three branches), nevertheless the networking remains invaluable. Critical Perspectives has now undertaken to look at the role of writing itself in the development of "arts-based civic dialogue"—a longer, more current, more admirably specific, and perhaps more exclusive term for what we used to call "cultural democracy." I'll use the latter here when talking about the general phenomenon, or desired goal, in order to avoid the infelicitous mouthful of "arts-based civic dialogue," which for all its accuracy, verges on grantspeak.

While many of us in the movement for cultural democracy were writers, I think I was the only full-time freelance "art critic"—a term I've always hated because of its implications of confrontation and authority, antagonism between artist and critic. I call myself a "writer and activist." Political and avant-garde art I knew first hand, but at the time I was an admirer, not a practitioner, of community arts, and writing about it called for different skills than those cultivated in the artworld. I had already struggled with being an "artworker"—how to write with my left politics on my sleeve in the face of editorial disapproval; and how to be, worse yet, a "feminist art critic"—writing primarily on women artists and from the movement itself. "If you want to send a message, call western union" was a warning I became all too familiar with in my most earnest days of proselytizing. "Crowd-pleasers" and "lowest common denominator" (and now, of course, the dreaded "PC") were epithets tossed at those of us straining to respect and to be accessible to broader audiences.

Here at the tail end of Critical Perspectives, I find myself in the awkward position of being third in line. I have no first-hand experience of the three impressive projects around which this book is built, nor any first-hand experience in the complex process of reciprocity among the nine writers (and sometimes among the writers and project directors) that has taken place by e-mail, telephone, and within the San Francisco writers' gathering (though Andrea Assaf's cogent recapitulation was very helpful). Having always depended heavily on "lived experience," here I am entirely removed from the process (although I did sit in on two of the wrap-up phone conferences). I didn't hear any of the voices that were these writers' raw material. I hesitated to enter into yet another series of dialogues for fear of capsizing the already overburdened ship of intercommunication. There's no point in my quoting much of the twelve skillful and insightful essays when you can read them for yourselves, but their voices and insights are the bedrock of this text.

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Maribel Alvarez, while empathizing with the burden of "accurate representation" that artists are unaccustomed to bearing, points out "the sobering recognition that as a way of looking at 'social facts,' art is still more comfortable in the realm of the imagination." In arts-based civic dialogues, writers become surrogates for communities they may not even know, intuiting other people's dreams and desires and aspirations and hang-ups. (This can be fine, so long as the limitations are made clear, but the actual "communities" may be heard snickering or snarling in the background at certain assumptions.) The rather utopian notion of "reciprocal ethnography" has been widely embraced, but sometimes only one party is interested in knowing the other, or has the tools to dig beneath the surface. You can't force reciprocity and mutual curiosity. An outside writer's enthusiasm about inside events may be totally honest, but her ignorance of all the layers can be perceived by insiders as exoticizing, sensationalizing, and patronizing. If the "lucky-you-I've-come-to-make-art-for-you" syndrome has finally, with consciousness rising over the years, given way to "lucky-you-I've-come-to-make-art-*with*-you," the ultimate goal of "lucky-me-I've-come-to-learn-from-making-art-with- you . . . if-it's-something-you-think-will-be-useful-to-you?" still needs some fine-tuning. This is where the Animating Democracy and Critical Perspectives programs come in.

A familiarity with history, cultural geography, sociology, ethnography, or community development may be useful, but it does not always appeal to those who prefer to think about esthetics, and vice versa for scholars who have to

learn about art and find formalism off-putting. Sometimes a broad base of knowledge works better as a silent, or invisible, base, than as a platform for scholarly display. As Ferdinand Lewis says, these projects are at the opposite end of the scale from the "universality" presumed of high art. They are "made for a particular moment, place and audience . . . about how history has shaped a particular population's ability to live in a specific place at a given time. . . . While all art *include*s its audience (and critics) in a subjective experience, arts-based civic dialogue also *implicates* them."

The danger is that no matter how powerful, place-specific works may be seen from the outside as "merely regional." Even though one region could easily absorb us personally for a lifetime, outsiders won't be permanently fascinated; publishing opportunities dry up—"too regional." A group of local writers in New Mexico howled with bitter laughter when I said earnestly that it must be possible to make local writing interesting to the outside world "as a microcosm" of the larger picture. Yet unidealized regional passions put in a broader context can ride the next ripple outwards. I think of the Dakota Theatre Caravan's learning to find the hearts of the small towns where they visited and created pieces, becoming a model for other regions in the process. Or Alabama's Rural Studio, in which building inexpensively beautiful homes for poor people out of recycled materials offers an exemplary solution to the national crisis in affordable housing.

I still think what has been called a "critical regionalism" is possible. While it is possible to write from the outside and be critical of process and approach to regional issues, local historical context and social dynamics are much more labyrinthine. Those writing from the inside who want to shame the devil can run the risk of ostracism or being run out of town. A sensible approach shares credit and blame while trying to avoid both. Yet neutrality and objectivity are hard to come by and perhaps non-existent in most situations. The most obvious—and perhaps still the most valuable—role of writing about arts-based civic projects, whether first-hand or come-lately, is descriptive reportage—a warp preferably threaded with the weft of participants' voices. (People talking like normal folks talk is a welcome antidote to internecine critical musings.) In many ways this is the most valuable role, since what our community of writers/artists needs is project models of both successes and failures, so the wheel isn't constantly reinvented. Aside from a few small periodicals, this work is too rarely documented. Already it's clear that younger writers are foggy about the three decades from the 1960s through the 1980s, when so many of these models were created, absorbed, and apparently forgotten. If that's the story in the U.S., imagine how little we know about Latin American, African, Asian, and European forays into this field (despite a certain amount of quasi colonialist toe-dipping into collaborative and community-referenced—rather than community-based—art within the global artworld). The assumption of a dichotomy between global and local overlooks the fact that the global is simply the sum of many locals. Books like Mady Schutzman's and Jan Cohen-Cruz's on Augusto Boal's re-contextualized theatre[1] become infinitely important to the further development of civic dialogue.

Spaces can play the same role. The high, cramped Slave Galleries, looking *down* on a white congregation that failed to practice Christian charity, have galvanized writers and viewers. Maribel Alvarez sees the evolution of MACLA's space as "a work of cultural production," occupying "a peculiar place in the ecology of the art-culture system—spaces where new interventions in civic society are workshopped." Dell'Arte's outdoor amphitheater provides a literally public platform for the community's concerns, where the company's thirty-year commitment to a "theatre of place" can be played out.

As Lydia Matthews points out, "If we regard the work of art more as a period of time to be *lived through* rather than merely a space to be *walked through* or an object to be collected, art practice becomes something like opening an unlimited discussion." In projects like these, writers, artists, participants, and readers/viewers all take part in a grand collaboration. An advocacy critic tries to be a catalyst, the medium through which a dialogue or exchange is facilitated. Strategizing, brainstorming, good honest mutual criticism are all grist to the mill. Collaboration makes

[1] Mady Schutzman and Jan Cohen-Cruz, eds. *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism*, London/New York: Routledge, 1994.

individual work go faster, raising multiple ideas and viewpoints no one person would have alone. I can't speak for cyber collaborations since I prefer mine face to face, elbow to elbow, but I have friends who find that cyber media have opened their minds and cut the ties on their tongues, and there is no denying the positive effect of the Web on social activism.

The other important facet of writing about Animating Democracy projects and their ilk is interpretation and analysis. Here we step into the quicksand. As writer Sonja Kuftinec has insisted, a critical point for all of us is to continue "to affirm that theory and thinking are not just academic concerns."[2] Are theory and thinking the same thing? I must say I'm more interested in ideas than theories. Ideas seem more fluid, more practically adaptable, while theories do imply academia to me, a certain authoritative finality, locking ideas up into boxes to which not all of us have the key. The best theories evolve organically, from practice. And they evolve from each writer's background and lived experience, which keeps us from repeating each other. Avoiding the personal drains the juice out of those subjects that may be enhanced by it. The hardest thing about writing about art and civic dialogue is balancing accessibility and depth, remembering one's responsibility to the people you're working with and at the same time keeping the writing itself fresh and provocative, finding new ways to express and illustrate and dissect the basic (and therefore "same old") problems of raising consciousness in communities working for social change. Dancer Liz Lerman recommends that opinions be made into "neutral" questions as a way of offering feedback in a non-confrontational manner.

Jim O'Quinn, aspiring as we all do to "writing that is multidimensional, politically informed and rooted in a principled point of view," asks the hard question: "How does a writer's voice create an implicit or explicit relationship with the reader?" Writing, like art, should evoke, invoke, provoke. Irony and Brechtian distancing are useful in some circumstances, but intimacy works better in most community situations. A talking writer (or writing performer) like Lorraine Johnson-Coleman takes the material at hand and creates art from it, an avenue that should be open in both directions so that journalists, critics, and historians can be as inventive as storytellers and dramatists, just as Johnson-Coleman can be an African American history scholar within her art. Then back in the other direction, how evocative can the writer get without overwhelming his subject and smothering the dialogue? American writers are trained to be rugged individualists. As one-time outlaws becoming in-laws through civic dialogue, we are still easily seduced by our own words, carried away by our own flights of conceptual imagination.

Like any endeavor that has a long history, the art of civic dialogue or movement for cultural democracy has acquired its own vocabulary. Sometimes it's evocative and sometimes it's stultifying. Academic over-theorizing must take some of the blame. So must editors who want everyone to sound alike and are frightened by quirky individual styles. Practitioners can learn from the complexities exposed by postmodernism while rejecting the seductions of incomprehensible jargon. Most small groups and organizations have spent a lot of time learning to write grants; institutionalized language always threatens to infect expository prose. Artists' writings are often the most valuable sources of information, but not all artists can or want to write.

Following a long-term trend in other academic disciplines, and especially in cultural studies, interdisciplinary crossovers and dialogue are particularly valuable to the kind of hybrid being created here. In the last couple of decades, a lot of us have been dashing across borders to borrow each other's ideas and vocabularies. Ethnography and anthropology are frequently raided. Sometimes this is truly useful. Sometimes we just acquire more complicated terms with which to veil our lived experiences. The more convoluted the argument, the more esoteric the jargon, the smaller the audience. If the analysis isn't carried forward by deepening complexities, it becomes boring. If it's carried forward on a wave of unfamiliar words, it becomes intimidating.

[2] Sonya Kuftinec, "Critical Relations in Community-Based Performance: The Artist and Writer in Conversation," Americans for the Arts, www.AmericansForTheArts.org/AnimatingDemocracy/resource_center

Fear of print can be an obstacle to dialogue, even in this day and age of cyber-casual. A native resident of the *hispano* village where I live and edit the monthly newsletter once told me, "They'll never tell you all the stories, and if they did you couldn't print them." Among many of those who read little or are oppressed, underprivileged, and/or illiterate, the notion of seeing their words in print is not always an exhilarating honor; it can be scary and sometimes offensive. I am often confused as to who among the longtime locals likes to be quoted, have their family events mentioned, their family histories explored—and who doesn't. It isn't easy to understand everyone's current circumstances—to be sensitive to their needs, fears, desires, problems, prides at the moment—and also provide the information necessary to the public interest. Mistakes are inevitably made, and sometimes forgiven. (Rodger Taylor: *"people would say things in interviews and really freak out when they saw it in writing."*) Participants see writers by definition as powerful and authoritative. (Maribel Alvarez: *"The interventions of art/cultural scribes 'manipulate' reality as much as deconstruct it."*) For all our society's dismissal of print media, it remains the tool of the privileged. However humble we writers try to be, we can't deny that we are getting (some of) the last words. Selection is power. Those to whom writers in this field are "giving voice" rarely have any choice in the matter, though this does not mean that trust cannot be built and barriers overturned. Lorraine Johnson-Coleman gets down to brass tacks when she asks, "Where is the community voice in Critical Perspectives?"

Writers trying to make a living at the crossroads of community, culture, and class need to speak several languages, to know how to change codes in midstream, to come into each situation with fresh eyes and mind, to navigate the shoals of historical enmities, to give up the role of final arbiter, especially about cultures not our own. Karuk cultural historian Julian Lang offers an example, quoted here by Ferdinand Lewis, of how to relate the contradictions between modernity and ancient myths: "I am not so much into entertaining, but just presenting a big fat myth and letting people think about it. In order for you, a non-Indian, to understand my culture, you are going to have to walk away . . . thinking 'Jesus Christ, what was that?' Not in a negative sense, but it is just like—there are too many things in there. You can understand it on one hand, but on the other hand, it is too deep." Hiphop dancer Rennie Harris (quoted by Sonja Kuftinec) is eloquent about language and power: he makes sure he speaks the language of the dominant culture so he will be heard. But, he says, "I'm also going to challenge critics to come to my neighborhood. Can you stay there? Can you hang in there? Can you keep on going and learn how to have an appreciation and not an appropriation of the culture?"

None of us in the movement for cultural democracy are free of deeply held beliefs which, when simply expressed, become platitudes. How do we make our writing more varied, avoid monotonously hammering away on our fundamental values and shared goals? For instance, even the word civic is not always felicitous. For my generation, at least, it has oppressive connotations of "civics class" in high school—too often a mind-numbing reiteration of mainstream platitudes and conservative values. How about "post civic"? (Just kidding.) Similarly, the fetishization of dialogue as something momentous that transcends mere discussion, can be problematic. All dialogue is welcome, some is highly effective, but it is not all worth recording or even remembering. Just as there is small talk, there is small dialogue. The *act* of meaningful dialogue can be more important than anything that is actually said. (Jack Tchen: *"The art of the dialogic process is being able to share authority . . . the form of how we do things can be more important than what we say."*) From there, however, often comes frustration with the fact that not much *is* getting said. As writers, we have to forage among the thickets and weeds to pick out those aspects of a dialogue (no matter how few) that seem to lead somewhere. For me the more quotations from Animating Democracy's original dialogues the better, no matter how rough they may sound, and if that is missing in much of the writing here, it is because the primary sources weren't always available to them. (Critical Perspectives organizers Pam Korza and Caron Atlas concede that it would have been better to select the writers earlier in the process so that they would have had access to all the dialogues.)

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The Animating Democracy Initiatives are the latest foray into social energies not yet recognized as sources of art. Each of the three Animating Democracy projects lent themselves differently to the process set up for Critical

Perspectives. Each seems to have sparked a different methodology, a different kind of dialogue, a different result. In each case the relationship to the project directors and artists was also different. Jack Tchen's meticulous but accessible historical take on the Slave Galleries project, in which he negotiates the African American history in place, and the Chinese American histories entering the neighborhood, is a model of non-traditional, community-based history, and a breath of fresh air. Rodger Taylor's inside view is enhanced by solid research and soul searching that make his text a richly woven account of a congregation haunted by a space. Along with Lorraine Johnson-Coleman's (Wisdom Woman's) powerful monologue backed by scholarship, these were ideal vehicles with which to embrace the educational/interpretive mission at St. Augustine's Church. Project director Deacon Edgar Hopper played an integral role throughout; the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's initial support and reluctant exit from formal involvement offered still another layer of internal dialogue, suggesting some of the tensions inevitable in every such enterprise.

In the Dentalium Project, Jim O'Quinn's outside theatre expertise, Ferdinand Lewis's ability to bring together community development and theoretical/esthetic concerns, and David Rooks's particularly valuable view of the implications of Casino gaming for Native and other communities (Greed or Hope?) again perfectly complimented each other to expose the successes and failures of the play, *Wild Card*, which was later reprised in modified form. This seemed to me at once the most flawed (or most difficult) and best-analyzed project; its built-in obstacles giving the writers something to sink their teeth into. A report from Dell'Arte director Michael Fields from the inside, or the hot seat, eloquently describes what it is like to live and work in the place where you are stirring up honest dialogues about the future: "We see all these people daily. . . . We will live with the consequences of our actions and this creation for years to come. . . . the complexity, nature and culture of *this* place informs all that we do."

Ties That Bind, the most elusive subject of the three because of the deeply personal character of marriage itself, gained from Lydia Matthews's breadth of experience and knowledge on new genre public art and contemporary art history, Michael Rosenfeld's straightforward treatise on the sociology of intermarriage, and Renato Rosaldo's own hybrid "anthropoetics." I found myself wondering why the voices of the two artists—Lissa Jones and Jennifer Ahn, handpicked to create the handsome installation—were almost inaudible.

The word "team" seems a bit inappropriate as a description of the three writers on each project. Some were more like a support group, others like a workshop. Although all of them met at the San Francisco gathering, the Dentalium three were the only ones to share a common experience, since they all saw the play, *Wild Card*, at the same time. This was obviously an advantage; their coverage gained from an agreed-upon division of labor and the discussions led to long-distance friendships. Each team worked out its own modus vivendi within the framework set by Critical Perspectives. One group felt it would have been more productive to start working together after San Francisco, since the discussions there crystallized their roles and "made it clear how it all fit together." And what difference would it have made if a larger proportion of the writers had been women?

The limitations of an art context and the constraints an art form can put on social content like Asian-Latino intermarriage is obvious in *Ties that Bind*, where specific stories were generalized in aid of art. Having said that, I can also turn it on its head: the limitations of detailed research can be opened up and made vibrant by such a sensitive visual presentation (though more "Asian" than "Latino" inspired) which brings the high art of installation to the usual dreary artlessness of educational displays. Similarly the virtues and limitations of an open-ended educational project and a space that inspires through a visceral rather than expository connection to its content is obvious in the Slave Galleries project. (Lorraine Johnson-Coleman: *"I see the colors of soul splattered here, there and everywhere, cradled in crevices we ain't even begun climbin' into. I see ghosts, too, leftovers and leavin's of folks who waited for their spirits to be lifted clear up to the Lord."* Rodger Taylor, in the galleries with his nine-year-old son and friend: *"For a minute I felt like we were flying, being bathed in our history."*)

And the virtues and limitations of a very public expose of local politics that lampoons almost everybody but had to pussyfoot around the thousand-pound gorilla of Native absence are obvious in *Wild Card*. Dell'Arte's highly stylized comedy is not everyone's cup of tea and was apparently foreign to those in the Rancheria whom they had hoped to draw into the process. (I have come to love and respect "Indian humor" as a subtle critical weapon; it is hard to imagine, in turn, how it would have fit into this framework; but that is precisely the task ahead.) Nevertheless, because of *Wild Card*, a new city council member ran and was elected and became a liaison to the Rancheria, a community group is meeting monthly to talk about the town's future, and the city and the Rancheria are talking to each other. Few artworks can point to such direct results.

As writers we can remind each other to let go, to say what we really saw and really think, and let the chips fall where they may. I read this over and it sounds irresponsible—accountability cast to the winds. Yet risk-taking is constantly invoked as a trademark of "real art." Why should *this* kind of writing be cautious? And then again . . . irresponsible art, whether it flatters or bludgeons, can sacrifice its effectiveness. So how do we draw the line? The writer needs to know the community well enough to be able to joke with it (not necessarily about it). Witness the problems that arose within the Dentalium/*Wild Card* Project due to the history of strained relations between Blue Lake City and the Blue Lake Rancheria. The songs "You Can't Say That!" and "Why There are No Indians in This Show" took the bull by the horns but never threw him. In a phone conference, Lakota writer David Rooks said something that made an impression on me, something to the effect of: jokes are great after you are comfortable with each other, but first you have to be serious about serious things.

We all pull our punches for various sensible reasons, but the balance is truly hard to find. Self-censorship is lousy for any kind of creative activity. (Lorraine Johnson-Coleman: *"I don't think our preschool teachers were referencing historical interpretation when they said . . . if we can't say something nice, we shouldn't say anything at all.")* Yet funding sources can't be insulted, community leaders have been invited to participate and can't be offended either, and so forth. If we pull too many punches, somewhere along the line we find our writing about this kind of work beginning to sound textbooky, pollyannaish or pompous. Rodger Taylor, writer, but also a historical researcher and longtime parishioner of St. Augustine's church, comments on having to please several different entities within the same project, the difficulties of "trying to do an insider piece with insiders all around you that you have dynamic relationships with. . . . it was almost like I had to run everything by four heads, which was weird." But in the end, he knew he had gained from the dialogues.

In all of these cases the notion of soliciting multiple viewpoints has worked well. I suspect that at times the regulated process was exhilarating and other times annoying. And if, from the outside, the Critical Perspectives process seems inordinately elaborate, possibly overdetermined, the participants enjoyed it and learned from it, so who am I to carp? Most important, writers of any kind are rarely so lucky as to receive the gifts offered by Critical Perspectives: a meeting of minds with other professionals, constructive feedback from people with shared interests and goals, a chance to step back and observe our own roles and goals, and a publication at the end of it all. This book will be successful if it draws other writers, other scholars, other artists into the web of the Animating Democracy Initiatives.

"DON'T LISTEN TO WHAT THEY SAY, WATCH WHAT THEY DO."
(Native saying quoted by David Rook