

I am deeply happy to contribute to this cause, which must concern everyone who stands for freedom progressive democracy and for humanity.

Today the artist cannot hold himself aloof. Through the destruction in certain countries of the greatest of man's cultural heritage, through the propagation of false ideals of racial and national superiority the scientist, the writer, the artist is challenged. The challenge must be taken up for this culture a legacy from our predecessors is the foundation upon which we build a higher and all embracing culture. It belongs not only to us, not only to our present generation; it belongs to our posterity and must be courageously defended.

Paul Robeson 1937

Introduction

I was recently asked by an artist friend to write a letter reflecting upon progress and its significance on a cultural and personal level. In my attempt to do so, I found myself caught up in the semantics of what progress actually means as opposed to what society sets forth as progress, what education means as opposed to what its actual practice frequently encompasses, what social engagement means as opposed to what is often described as such and what the barriers used by society to isolate the arts from daily existence are.

I was so lost in the ever-shifting measurements of progress that I found myself needing to rethink art, its capacity to shift societal norms and the legacy of intellectuals who were capable and dedicated to tapping into the hearts and souls of 'every day people'. I was interested in examining the social responsibility that every one of us faces, if for no other reason than for our 'posterity', as Robeson stated so eloquently 80 years ago. There are many visionaries among us today whose wisdom and critique have the ability to uproot even the most grounded of us, but their voices, while robust are marginalized, at best and censored at worst. It is all too often that we find ourselves so fixed on being rooted that the very notion of shifting our foundation and destabilizing our existence is terrifying. The following is a reflection that strives not to generate conclusions but to force the necessary questioning, as suggested by the title, that sees every one of us as creatives capable of shifting the world around us and turning upside down the defaults of our typically distracted existence. Poet, Saul Williams wrote a poem titled "Fck the Beliefs" which suggests that beliefs are the police of the mind and asks probingly 'What is your mind's immigration policy?' The following essay is about checking the beliefs we have established for ourselves over time and challenging

ourselves while actively engaging the world we inhabit. The letter emerged as a manifesto, a call to arms that reminds artists that curiosity is a synonym for creativity.



Manifesto

Much has been written about the distinctions between art and life, their inescapable interconnectedness and, as the plentitude of gradations diversifying lives are inherent, our vision of art within the context of social obligation is read quite distinctly around the world and of course within every arts community globally. The artistic voice has the capacity to be an interpretive one, pushing beyond social and economic spheres to imagine new possibilities frequently engaging the materials right within our reach to speak to ideals far beyond it. This interpretation and expression engages our histories and our social structures, as they exist today. The blending of past and present is what makes some of the most innovative work feel so uncannily familiar. T.S. Eliot in his 1921 essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* tells us that ‘...the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet (Artist) who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties ad responsibilities.’ Throughout history, art can be read through the lens of activism and activism can be read through the lens of art. To speak out, to denounce to be a cause for change requires vision that extends beyond the narrow sights of mass media sources which

bombard us with a vision of art and of activism, which are in fact intended to be purposely shallow. The overload of information that saturates our current sphere with its heavy repetition and fleeting social concerns is a little like a language listening comprehension tape constantly shifting the content and direction. This change in subject, in this case, unlike the didactic tool, is not to make sure you are listening but instead to create distraction from engaging too fully in the woes of society and the questioning of the source of these woes. Gil Scott Heron in his 1978 *We Beg Your Pardon* speaks of the United States as a 'Jekyll and Hide that sneaks up on you but rarely surprises'. He says that America leads the world in being shocked but unfortunately does not lead the world in discerning the cause of this shock. This disconnect between cause and effect is not particular to the USA and instead is typical of a contemporary global consciousness more connected than ever yet more isolated from social engagement and helplessly distant from obtaining or even attempting to obtain the 'bigger picture'. The artist in all of this is simply part and parcel of society at large. Art, frequently deemed all but a career, is often as titillated by the Art World's infatuation with aesthetics, tongue in cheek coyness and all too often token social issues that reinforce what they have already learned about diversity from standardized and sound bite ridden sources.

When we explore the legacy of Paul Leroy Robeson, remembered by most as a remarkable singer and actor, (remembered by far too few as a poignant activist) we are faced with the potential for arts and activism to be one and the same. Robeson's activism, leading to him being black listed by the US government and financially ruined in the process, not to mention stripped from the official record almost fully, was the fuel for his art. He discovered that his vision of global unity against fascistic and nationalistic separatism, domination and oppression did not require the composing of aggressive songs of denouncement (which he also engaged in). It required a simple shift in context be it the performance of African American Folk songs (often attributed to lower social status) embedded in a 'classical' repertoire and sung in some of the most prestigious concert halls around the world, or in the performance of the same songs for workers at rallies in Wells or soldiers on the front lines of the Spanish Civil War. We would be hard off to think of any performer today with anything near the equivalent of Robeson's standing going off to sing at the frontlines of battle in a country that was not their own based solely on an understanding and dire belief that oppression around the world can be fought artistically. This example along with that set by the writer Langston Hughes in the same period should provide the artist of today with a sense of how far reaching our efforts have the potential to be. It is important to remember that one need not have the popularity or standing in society of these figures in order to directly impact the world around us.

This quest for the artist to use their critical views and expressive capacity to affect the society

around them involves stepping beyond the standards established during an immersion in education both formally in schools and informally through our engagement with society that, too frequently, push away from the questioning and stirring that education and growth should stand for. The striving for comfort and economic viability are placed in the upper echelon of our social systems outweighing our concern for others or our capacity to be outright individuals in our journey through this world. James Baldwin, in a speech at Castelmont High school in Oakland, CA on June 23rd 1964 talks about how education does not occur in a vacuum and instead it occurs within a social context and above all 'has social ends' and says that one of the responsibilities of an education is to 'question the purpose of education'. He goes on to address the aims of Society in contrast with the aims of Education. He states that 'The aims of a society are and always must be to inculcate in its citizens a certain sense of security and to discourage its citizens from disturbing the peace...This is a necessity and it is even an admirable necessity...Though society is under the obligation to educate all of its citizens it is also under the obligation to discourage people from thinking too much...' Art could easily replace the word education here and this rift between stable societal norms and real education is at the root of the lowered importance given to education in the arts and the unacceptability of placing the arts in sync with all of our societal needs. Art is questioning, art is non-acceptance of one's surroundings, and art is the physical or conceptual turning of the tables and insistent probing of the meaning of vitality and perhaps of the significance of identity within the broader context of historical and contemporary categorization. The artist often seeks to disrupt this very categorization, to upset the standards and to push others to see these possibilities for rupture.

In a speech at the University of Puerto Rico in 2013, Dr. Cornell West invokes the words of Percy Shelly's saying that 'Poets (ARTISTS) are the unacknowledged legislators of the world' West goes on to say that:

'All human beings have the empathy and imagination to muster the courage to conceive of an alternative world that's different from the present one and to transform the present one of too much domination, too much oppression, too much social misery and too much unnecessary suffering but you need courage you need reflection, you need connection you need organization to do that. So when we talk about the arts.... We are not just talking about superficial forms of entertainment we are talking about ways of being in the world that enable you to look through lenses that are different and deeper than the ones that the mainstream media makes available to you.'

This requires that individuals are willing and ready to fail, to be economically not viable, to shift the

meaning of value, to reject that which their teachers bring them, to distrust and problematize everything they encounter, to create not just as a means of release for themselves but as an altruistic form of release for all those beyond their reach. Art can also be this. The sacrifice and dedication required for this is massive and unsurpassable which is why we celebrate giants such as Robeson and many others who followed through with their vision against all obstacles and contributed to societal shifts that they may not have lived to see. Trumpet player and writer Nicolas Payton in his essay *On Truth and Beauty in the Age of Bullshit* addresses our current place in regards to art stating that 'Escapism and deniability is what's fashionable and confronting truth is passé.' Artists must engage in the long distance approach to creation realizing that the path and even perhaps the destination must change along the way but that there is always work to be done. In an attempt to be globally connected and engaged there must be more than sideways glances at the immediate environment they are surrounded by. This is not to say that people need to start in 'their own back yard' but it is to say that they must have a sense of their own back yard, as it is that very context that will consistently fuel a vision of that which extends beyond our comprehension and knowledge.

One societal trap placed on art in recent times has been actually very related to education and moreover to a didactic set of meanings that can be obtained through observation. This pitfall is unequivocally devastating to the broadening of the miniscule audience engaged in the spaces dedicated to the contemporary production of the arts and demoralizing for the potential as artist to be activists. Somewhere and somehow along the trajectory of the history of art, art was embedded with the objective of understanding or 'getting it' in a way that has crippled visual art even more than the worlds of dance, theatre, music, writing and other forms. This expectation of understanding sets experience and feeling as well as probing and questioning aside, instead valorizing and awarding the self-gratifying understanding of work more relatable to standardized educational tropes. This understanding or 'getting it' results in a viewing public that seems to be asked to solve visual equations and walk off light hearted with this comprehension or, perhaps worse, walking off with a feeling of not 'getting it' with the assumption that art is above most of our heads. If an artist is to engage in activism and to grapple with the social issues that permeate in our world they must use languages that stray from the didactic, they must create equations not meant to be solved but instead meant to get under one's skin and itch. There must be a rift, even and perhaps most importantly, with the community that embraces them, with the 'art world' in which they are consistently read. There must be a constant reminder in the words of Nicolas Payton that 'We're not here for comfort. We are here to grow'.



Conclusion

In 2008 I met one of the most influential artists of our time and of particular importance in the Italian context which was his home for over a half a century, Jannis Kounellis. I spent two weeks with the artist in Santander Spain grouped with a range of 14 young artists from Spain, Mexico, Columbia and Turkey. The context consisted of daily meetings situated around a wooden table in the Villa Iris of the Fundacion Marcelino Botin and listening to the political fervor and aged wisdom of Kounellis's cryptic words. He began by saying that 'All art (When he said this he meant true art) begins at the bottom of a well and as humans we strive to get out of this well using the only tool we have at our disposition, our work. Standing upon our work we can look up and see the light above us. The walls of the well however are our ambition and are in constant growth.' This probing of meaning and metaphor was what pushed everyone in that room and uprooted all things deemed important in artistic creation. The lessons learned in the two weeks following that opening phrase and in the 8 years of frequenting this true master's open door are deeply embedded in my consciousness and being as an artist and as an educator. The paradox laid out before us as artists as outsiders is a constant flame that burns as much as it illuminates. Jannis said 'The artist has the right to happiness, to get beyond sadness and in order for this to happen he/she has to be their own

keeper (proprietario di se stessi)'. The systems and societal structures that dictate our daily rituals and interaction with each other have a capacity for control that is often beyond our perception and too often go unchecked. Consciousness and education, true education is our own means for combating this. We need an arsenal and perhaps an army ready to passively flip it (the whole system) off. The 'life of the mind' is liberating but brings about an awareness that can feel damning. In the song A.D 2000 Erykah Badu sings 'You won't be naming no buildings after me to go down dilapidated'. We have to rethink our monuments and the way we memorialize figures to avoid the oversimplification that leads all too frequently to social amnesia and we need to be weary of the rebranding of historiographies for the purpose of aligning them with societal norms or the flattening of humanity. In the words of the eternal Badu 'Stay Woke'.

Bibliography

- Badu, Erykah, Questlove, Pino Palladino, James Poyser, Jay Dee, Wayne Kerr, Braylon Lacy, Shaun Martini, and Stephen Marley. *A.D. 2000 Mama's Gun*. Motown, 2000. CD.
- Baldwin, James. "James Baldwin Speaks! The Fire This Time: A Message to Black Youth." *YouTube*. YouTube, 25 May 2015. Web. 01 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=69pi63RgeJ4>>.
- Eliot, T. S. *Selected Essays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950. Print.
- Payton, Nicolas. "On Truth and Beauty in the Age of Bullshit." *Nicholas Payton*. N.p., 01 Nov. 2013. Web. 25 Apr. 2016 <<https://nicholaspayton.wordpress.com/2013/11/01/on-truth-and-beauty-in-the-age-of-bullshit/>>
- Robeson, Paul. "Paul Robeson - Artists Can't Stand Aloof." *YouTube*. YouTube, 11 July 2008. Web. 01 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMRkx4LNK54N0ah2002>>.
- Scott-Heron, Gil, and Brian Jackson. *The First Minute of a New Day*. Gil Scott-Heron. Arista, 1975. CD.
- West, Cornel. "Cornel West University of Puerto Rico." *YouTube*. YouTube, 28 Sept. 2013. Web. 01 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QARRBP8QyoMApereznieves>>.
- Williams, Saul. *Fck the Beliefs*. Dir. Desmond Roberson. Perf. Saul Williams. *Fck the Beliefs*. N.p., 4 June 2014. Web.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Justin Randolph Thompson

Justin Randolph Thompson is a new media artist and educator born in Peekskill, NY in '79. Living between Italy and the US since 2001, Thompson is a recipient numerous awards including the 2015 Franklin Furnace Fund, the 2013 Louis Comfort Tiffany Award, a 2013 Visual Art Grant from the Fundacion Marcelino Botin, a 2013 Emerging Artist Fellowship at Socrates Sculpture Park, a Foundation for Contemporary Art Emergency Grant. Thompson has exhibited at venues including Blue Star Contemporary Art Museum in San Antonio, at Villa Romana in Florence, the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Reina Sofia in Madrid. His work seeks to deepen the discussions around cultural and racial stratification and hierarchical organization by outlining a complex, hybrid and non-linear connection to history and sociopolitical discourse.