

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Theater

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The International Human Rights Arts Festival at Dixon Place

by Pirronne Yousefzadeh

The American writer, painter, and spoken-word performer William S. Burroughs once said: “Artists to my mind are the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact.” But when political art is seen as a niche separate from more conventional forms of entertainment, how do we as artists bring that work into the mainstream conversation? How do we maximize engagement and impact? Perhaps an intersectional and multidisciplinary approach is part of the answer.

Over the span of three days in March, Dixon Place will host over forty workshops, panel discussions, spoken word performances, readings, exhibitions, and more as part of *The International Human Rights Arts Festival*. This festival is the first of its kind in New York City, and its founder and curator Tom Block (whose work will also be featured) aims to bring together over seventy artists, gathering the energy of a variety of artists and ideas that can heighten “activist impulse and social renovation.” As a longtime activist artist, Tom is “always looking for ways to expand activist energy,” a quest that manifests itself in his own creative projects and previous festivals he has produced (including the Amnesty International Festival in 2010).

The broad range of works in the festival will offer audiences a variety of points of entry into the multi-faceted issue of human rights. With everything from poetry performances to



dance to workshops with kids, the festival fully embraces the inherently inclusive ideas of human rights and human rights activism by way of a democratic, non-hierarchical diversity in programming. Put another way, the range of artistic expression is as wide and expansive as the central issue of the festival itself. To that end, Tom Block has curated the pieces with an eye toward not only the talents and level of craft of those involved, but also their “incredible passion and sincerity.”

Sojourner Truth, Festival Godmother. Painting by Tom Block.

A collective called Poetic People Power will present *While We Were Sleeping*, which will include commissioned work from Tara Bracco, Philippe Garcesto, Karla Jackson-Brewer, Langston Leguizamo, SM Manieri, Shetal Shah, and Natalia Vargas-Caba. Each poet has chosen a particular topic in human rights abuses to explore in poetic form—ranging from sex trafficking in New York City, to honor killings in the United Kingdom, to the food crisis in Venezuela. Tara Bracco has been working with Poetic People Power for fifteen years, after first organizing a poetry reading against the Iraq War in 2003. “P3,” as Tara calls it, “researches timely issues and commissions poets to write new poems, inspired by social and political topics, like inequality, the water crisis, and gentrification.” This performance alone embraces an impressively multi-faceted and international perspective on human rights and the abuses that occur around the world. Moreover, each artist employs a different style of poetry. So, within the broader category of spoken word, *While We Were Sleeping* contains a large breadth and scope, broadening not only the viewers’ sense of where and how human rights abuses occur, but of the artistic medium itself.

As is standard for Poetic People Power, the program will include resources for audience members to learn more and stay engaged with the issues after they leave the theater. Bracco finds this added step essential to their mission, and to the power and impact of activist art. For Bracco, P3 serves to prime audiences for real engagement in the issues at hand, and she has seen tremendous action result from their performances. “Audience members have changed their water habits,” she says. “People are more mindful about consuming goods and products, people have joined email campaigns and protests, some began volunteering, and others were inspired to write their own poems.” Bracco herself was inspired to cofound a nonprofit, The Project Solution, which has provided direct funding to address issues including water shortages, sanitation, and education in countries around the world. “These are real outcomes as a result from our poetry shows,” says Bracco.

In contrast to the broad, international scope of *While You Were Sleeping*, other artists have chosen a specific and historical focus to their work. One of these is *Kidnap Road* by Catherine Filloux. While working with a collaborator on a different project in 2012, Filloux was introduced to the story of Ingrid Betancourt, the Colombian presidential candidate who was held hostage from 2002 – 08 in a jungle. Filloux began her research, and Betancourt’s story, and its continued relevance struck a chord.

After its stint in the festival, *Kidnap Road* will go into production at La MaMa this spring. In the current

political and social climate, the play's contemporary resonance has further deepened for Filloux. "The stunning example of the backlash against women leaders has never been more present for me," she relates. "The blatant discrimination against women leaders who are chronically silenced, with the blame then hoisted on them that they did this to themselves."

For director Elena Araoz, who will continue with the project at La MaMa, the parallels between Betancourt's story and the state of United States politics run deep, particularly in the patriarchal impulse to silence those who speak out against corruption and advocate for the disadvantaged. For her, the shocking story raises questions about women in U.S. politics. She notes, "the way Trump stalked Hillary during the debates, threatening to put her in jail, and encouraging the conservative 'Lock her up' chanters; the way the American people, so afraid that a rich Hillary Clinton was out of touch with the poor, instead voted for a rich man who seems he's never cared about or worked for the poor."

Araoz continues by relating, "Elizabeth Warren's literal silencing on the Senate floor, and the voice and legacy of Coretta Scott King silenced along with her." She wonders how it could be that, for all our modernity, we remain "so backwards, [and] have such a problem with women leaders who admonish the male establishment for corruption."

Of course, many of the artists in the festival feel a deepening urgency for this type of work. This is no surprise, following the election and many people's changing sense of the America in which we live. Superhero Clubhouse, a collective of artists and scientists working at the intersection of environmentalism and theater, will present *PLUTO (no longer a play)*, a piece about mass extinction, our decreasing biodiversity, and whether it is worth fighting for a doomed species.

Jeremy Pickard, Superhero Clubhouse's founder and co-director of *PLUTO*, was struck by the relevance and timeliness of the collective's upcoming projects following the election. "*PLUTO* is about loss; about coming face to face with massive, inevitable loss, and then trying to figure out how to move forward, [and] deciding where best to put our energies and resources and emotions," Pickard says. This is the microcosm of the macrocosm for Superhero Clubhouse: while their work intersects with current environmental and political issues, they feel a strong sense of responsibility to "activate our



Tara Bracco, of Poetic People Power. Photo: Leah Rae Photography

communities with hope,” as Pickard says.

Given their subject matter—“gloomy topics [like] climate change and the Trump administration”—hope can be hard to incorporate. Pickard relates that they struggled with this even before the election, partly because, “real hope often involves compromise; it isn’t as simple as a happy ending, it’s got to feel practical to an audience.” After the election, he says, the company’s struggle to inspire hope has become more urgent, and “more difficult to manifest. But we are determined to figure it out.”

Lani Fu, co-director of *PLUTO*, adds that it is the sense of intersectionality that maintains a sense of hope and motivation: “I am learning to see what we do as a part of a network of people interested in progressive social and environmental justice, doing the same work in different ways, on different scales, with different methods. It’s an ecosystem, and we feed each other.

In addition to curating and producing the festival, Tom Block himself is also presenting a play, *Duck*, as well as pieces from *The Human Rights Painting Project*. The two are not only different mediums, but also examine the issue of human rights through distinct lenses. Originally created from four ten-minute plays developed and directed by Brad Raimondo, *Duck* tells the story of a man whose career in the C.I.A. begins with a patriotic sense of hope and optimism, but ultimately leaves him unmoored and unsure of what to believe in. The piece is born of Block’s fascination with the human desire for control, how that manifests itself in our government (among other institutions). Additionally, he’s curious about the fact that whenever any of us follows our own impulse to fight against those systems, as Block says, “We all have to ask ourselves what we are willing to risk.”

While *Duck* interrogates our own government and the dangers of our own complicity, *The Human Rights Painting Project* is a series of portraits of human rights heroes. Block’s paintings are deliberately expressionistic. They aim to capture the essence of these people, to celebrate and give visibility to their sacrifices, courage, and the many ways in which they are examples to us all. “Their belief, their faith in their ideals, and their willingness to sacrifice their lives for those ideals are the only things that make those ideals real for the rest of us,” Block says. The portraits are painted with vibrant, beautiful colors and lush oil paints, “because the pairing of beauty and pain is what their lives represent.” Additionally, Block displays a biography of each person next to their portrait, to give the viewer greater insight about the heroes whose souls he strives to capture in each piece.

These artists and their projects represent a small fraction of the work to be presented in the



From the Festival’s Death Penalty Photography Documentary Project. Photo: Scott Langley.

International Human Rights Arts Festival. Others include Mashuq Deen’s one-person show *Draw the Circle, Muslim Women Speak*, a discussion with Muslim women from around the world; J Chen Project Dance Commissions; and a dance party featuring DJ Chela, among many others. With events for people of every age (including KidsFest, which will give children hands-on experience with advocacy-art) and a diverse array of artistic mediums, the International Human Rights Arts Festival is a model for activist arts as a true meeting place for communities of diverse backgrounds and an intersectional engagement with the complex and multi-faceted issue of human rights.

“Activist artists are not the center of the American culture, but we’re at the center of the American soul,” Block says. The artists involved echo Block’s passionate belief in activist art as an essential core of both who we are as Americans and what we aspire to become as we continue to build towards an ideal society.

On this topic, Block shared a particularly inspiring and heartening story:

Whenever I get a little depressed about my [impact] as ‘just’ an artist, I remember the words of Chinese Democracy Activist Wei Jingsheng, who spent eighteen years in prison in China for advocating for democratic reforms. [...] When I first met Mr. Wei in 2002, he came out to my studio to see the paintings I had done of him. At that time, I had no profile. [...] When I asked him why he would get involved with an incipient project created by an unknown artist, he replied that in his darkest hours when he was in the middle of his prison time, often held in solitary confinement, it was only the artists who stood by him. They were the only ones with the courage and faith to stand with him—so now, he stood with artists when he could.



Festival participant Jessica Chen of the J Chen Dance Project. Photo: Paul Dimalanta.

This gives Block the faith to persist, to continue to pursue art as a mechanism for activism, engagement, and social change, not exclusively for entertainment. “If a man such as Wei Jingsheng finds courage and inspiration from our work, then what we are doing truly matters.”

Dixon Place and the Institute of Prophetic Activist Art present *The International Human Rights Art Festival*, March 3 – 5, 2017 at Dixon Place (161A Chrystie Street).

CONTRIBUTOR

Pirronne Yousefzadeh