

# The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics



Edited by Randy Martin

## Chapter 29

# Seeking a Theater of Liberation

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### Dudley Cocke

A lot of my youth was spent hunting, fishing, and trapping in the bays and marshes of eastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. Indoors meant listening to neighbors and kin tell stories. We didn't have a television, and radio couldn't compete. For a twelve year old boy with his first shotgun, sitting close to gruff men warming themselves by a wood stove as they told stories about the vagaries of duck hunting seemed what life had been made for.

At sixteen, I started paying attention to the civil rights movement, and when the radio announced Medgar Evers had been assassinated, I felt hope just draining away and remember thinking it wouldn't be coming back any time soon. I became focused on how my white community was reacting to the black freedom struggle, and shortly found myself protesting my community's lack of a principled stand. I was most disappointed by the churches' dodging of the issue. By the mid-1960s, when I became involved in the Vietnam anti-war movement, I considered myself an activist.

In 1975, a friend asked me to help him write a play. By then I was living in Appalachia, and the play's subject was several killings and two hangings that had

occurred in 1890-93 in southwestern Virginia. The period was a watershed moment in those mountains as frontier life suddenly gave way to banks and money, a new law and order, and the absentee ownership of the region's natural resources by national corporations. King Coal had stepped off the train and would try to dominate the people and the place for the next 100 years.

As my friend and I began researching the story that we were preparing to tell, we discovered two distinct narratives: one published by the industrialists and the other kept alive by the people. With little allowance for nuance, King Coal's version was about saving backward people from themselves. The people's version was about self-sufficiency, freedom, and maintaining a natural way of life. Since there had been two trials and two hangings, we hoped to find evidence supporting one version or the other. When we lucked on the original trial transcripts buried in piles of papers up in the old courthouse attic, we were surprised to find all the facts pointed to the people's version of the events. The play, *Red Fox/Second Hangin'*, brought together politics, storytelling, and history, and I set about establishing Roadside Theater to produce the play. I didn't know anything about the world of professional theater – and especially didn't understand how class-bound it was with 80% of its audience coming from the wealthiest 15% of the population. Class, race, and place would be abiding themes in Roadside's work for the ensuing 40 years.

Roadside Theater was founded in the coalfields of central Appalachia in 1975 as part of Appalshop, which had begun six years earlier as a War on Poverty/Office of Economic Opportunity job training program in film for poor youth. From its inception, these young Appalachians saw Appalshop as the means to tell the region's

story in the voices of the people living there. As part of this enthusiasm for celebrating local life, Roadside was welcomed into the Appalshop fold. We didn't have a theater, so we performed in churches, community centers, schools, and, in warm months, in a portable canvas revival tent we pitched up the hollows.



Roadside Theater performs *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* in a tent pitched in Pound, Virginia, 1981.



People of all ages loved what Roadside was doing, because it was about them, which they made abundantly clear. They came to *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* in part to see if Roadside had uncovered any new information about the murders and hangings. The story of those occurrences was still important to local people, to how they saw themselves, so audience members thought nothing about interrupting the performance to tell something they knew.

Roadside Theater performs *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* in a tent pitched in Pound, Virginia, 1981.

In this way, the script continued to develop for the first year or so.

The community ownership of Roadside's work often surprises people in the theater profession. Some years after the theater had been established, the arts program director of a national foundation came to evaluate Roadside's work. At the play's intermission, the foundation director was livid: "The woman to my right and the man to my left are both singing along to your original songs and sometimes completing a character's line. You've set me up, and this is decidedly not in your self-interest." "Please pick any seat you want for the second act," I said. When the play ended, the foundation program director came straight to me and apologized, saying the same thing had happened in her new seat and that she was moved beyond words by what she had experienced happening among 180 people.

As Roadside entered the world of professional theater, most of its artistic impulses seemed to fly in the face of established norms: all our performers learned their craft from their community of storytellers, singers, and preachers, not in arts school. As with an oft-told family story, Roadside actors knew by heart the entire script, not just their individual parts. If a performer was inspired to riff with the audience (the auditorium lights were never so dark that the audience couldn't see itself), members of the cast were ready to back her up – and then ensure that everyone landed back into the script at just the right time in the right key. In Roadside, there was no "fourth wall," curtains, or elaborate sets to distance the audience from creating the play with the actors in some personal yet collective imaginary that was neither the stage nor the auditorium seating. This meant that the story, not the play in and of itself, was the thing. Actors were directed not to block

access to the story but to perform in such a skillful way that the audience could see the story through them.

There's a story that illustrates this sensibility – whether it is factual, I can't say since I wasn't there, but, as an artist, I know it to be true. An internationally famous folk singer decided to travel to Appalachia to pay homage to the music that part of her fame rested on. The evening of her performance, the high school auditorium in the eastern Kentucky coal town was packed. A local string band opened the concert, and they say you could hear a pin drop as they played. The famous folksinger followed, with some success. Backstage after the concert, she congratulated the local band, noting how keenly the audience had been listening to their set. "What is that little something extra you guys had that I didn't?" she asked. Respectful of the fame of their guest, the band members shuffled their feet, and no one answered. Not taking silence as an answer, the spunky folksinger insisted teasingly, "Well boys, I'm not leaving this town until you tell me your secret!" Finally the fiddle player spoke up, "The only difference I could see, Miss Baez, is that you were playing out front of them old songs, and we were playing right behind 'em."

Roadside was having a great time performing with its community, but there just wasn't enough local money to support the actors. The standard adult admission to an evening performance of *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* was four dollars. Kids and the elderly were admitted free. Since we were popular and a part of Appalshop, a nonprofit, we decided to apply for some taxpayer support. For two years running, the Kentucky Arts Council rejected Roadside's application. Their attitude was no professional theater could possibly exist in such a backward part of the state. It was

then that Roadside decided the shortest route to the Kentucky state capitol was through New York City.

As it turned out, we were correct. *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* was a hit, first downtown at the Theater for the New City, and then uptown at the Manhattan Theatre Club. The tone of the reviews explain the difference between the two locations: downtown in the West Village the play was hailed by the Village Voice as “a series of hard male pranks . . . akin to *Wisconsin Death Trip*,” while uptown the New York Times proclaimed it “as stirring to the audience for its historical detective work as for the vanishing art of frontier yarn spinning.” After the Louisville Courier Journal reported the play was “a part of this country’s past the entire nation can treasure,” Kentucky Arts Council staff flew north to see what in tarnation was going on – and in their next granting cycle the Council joined the National Endowment for the Arts in supporting Roadside’s work.

In New York City, Roadside became identified with the avant-garde ensembles like Mabou Mines and the Wooster Group. At home in the mountains if anyone took the trouble to categorize Roadside, it was as folk theater. In fact, Roadside was probably the only professional theater to receive support from the National Endowment for the Arts’ Folk Arts Program.

After the New York City experience, what had been a marginal enterprise became a nonprofit business eventually capable of supporting as many as nine full-time ensemble members and half as many part-timers. Roadside had developed its own aesthetic and fresh content based on what its company members grew up with: storytelling, ballad singing, oral histories, and church. It had demonstrated that the

local and specific, when rendered faithfully and imaginatively in the voices of the culture's young people, could affect people anywhere. In sum, Roadside had brought to the stage some of the inherit genius of its Appalachian community. Now, the ensemble company set about writing and producing a cycle of plays that would span the time from the first European incursion (*Mountain Tales and Music*) to the present. Once the series was completed, it would be the first body of indigenous Appalachian drama and present a radically different version of the region's history than that published under the auspices of the coal corporations.

Performance fees from national touring became a significant part of Roadside's economy, typically accounting for more than half of the theater's annual income. These fees helped underwrite the extensive performance work Roadside continued to do in its home region of eastern Kentucky, southern West Virginia, western North Carolina, southwestern Virginia, and upper east Tennessee, and by 1989, Roadside had crisscrossed the country, performing in 34 states.

Just as we were thinking that we were sitting on top of the world, something strange began to happen: on national tour performing for elite audiences (the only audience existing for touring professional theater), we were shocked to discover that these audiences were literally able to change the meaning of the plays. By responding to content they understood and liked, and remaining silent during the parts they did not understand or like, the audience began to direct the actors, who found themselves cutting short or even deleting text that wasn't registering. Roadside's aesthetic, with its primary concern for audience members finding their own story in the play, encouraged this editing, and if enough people in the audience

had preconceived ideas about poor and working class people, the play could veer dangerously close to becoming a parody of its intentions. After one such performance, an actor remarked that despite the full exertion of her will power she could feel herself becoming Elly May Clampett, the stereotypical hillbilly of “Beverly Hillbillies” fame.

Roadside saw no easy way to address the problem, so in 1989 it made the decision not to perform in communities that would not contractually agree to work with the company to bring together all parts of their community. Roadside created a promotional “tool” kit which included carefully designed press releases, flyers, posters, pre-recorded radio spots in working class vernacular, a manual describing how best to use the material, and a three month calendar that lined out the timing of the publicity campaign. On a regular schedule, a company member made friendly calls to each presenter to learn how the campaign was going and to help problem solve. The extra effort and expense paid off. Roadside was now touring to full houses of diverse audiences, and the actors (and consequently the plays) were back in their groove. Then a new problem appeared.

After months of working on promotion with the local presenter in a mid-sized Alabama town, a big crowd greeted Roadside. “This is twice as many people as show-up for our performances!” exclaimed the presenter. It was standing room only, and it was obvious the crowd was a cross-section of the city. The actors were excited, and the working-class people attending had a great time. In fact, they understood the Appalachian play better than those in their city who were from the more formally educated class. The nimble reactions of the working class audience

members helped lead the others through the drama. There was a prolonged standing ovation, some stormed the stage to take pictures of their families with the Roadside actors, and, most importantly, to share their own stories. Roadside left town thinking it surely would be invited back to continue such an inspired exchange.

Four months later, Roadside's management called the presenter and said, "Haven't heard from you. I guess you want us back next season. Good for the box office!" The presenter replied he couldn't commit yet. Roadside called back nine months later and got the same answer. So, finally, on the third call, the company's managing director said, "I can tell you're not going to ask us to return. Why?" And the presenter said, "The play was really good. We never had such a big crowd before – or since. But our board of directors just didn't like the way y'all talked." Alabamans didn't like the way Appalachians talked? So the Roadside managing director said, "What do you mean?" The presenter said, "One board member said that if we keep having those people in our audience, they might want us to start programming country music, and we can't have that!"

What had happened, of course, was that certain people just didn't like sharing their evening with certain other people in the community who might even know more than they did about some parts of life. For such folks, the arts are akin to their country club, a chance to get away and be only with their own kind. Paradoxically, their tax-exempt status and public support was making their elite experience possible. Roadside's new challenge became finding a way to support

diverse audience members gaining an ongoing say in their local arts programs and a stake in the cultural development of their community.

Reflecting its founding during the War on Poverty, itself a program hastened by the civil rights movement, Roadside had regularly joined its brother and sister organizations of color to make inclusive multi-cultural festivals. In 1982, Roadside and Junebug Productions of New Orleans co-founded The American Festival Project, a national coalition that eventually included Pregones Theater, Urban Bush Women, El Teatro Campesino, A Traveling Jewish Theater, Carpetbag Theater, El Teatro Esperanza, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, Robbie McCauley & Company, and others. Hearing in 1990 from our southern colleagues that racism was on the rise in their communities, Roadside and Junebug Productions, the successor to the SNCC-inspired Free Southern Theater,

decided to create and tour a musical play about the historical relationship between black and white poor and working class people in the South. We agreed the play would span the time from the slave trade and the first landing of indentured servants until the end of the Vietnam War. To build a foundation for the play, the two ensembles sat together in circles



Ron Short/Roadside Theater and John O'Neal/Junebug Productions perform *Junebug/Jack*, a play about the history of race and class in the American South.

telling each other personal stories about their experience with race, place, and class. The circles helped us better hear each other and ourselves, and as we began to understand our differences, we were better able to see our history and current circumstances. After arriving at a script that we felt was real and testing it and revising it with our home audiences in Louisiana and Kentucky, we set about touring, our stock in trade.

We suggested potential sponsors of the new musical play, *Junebug/Jack*, ask themselves whether their community was ready to think about local race and class issues. If they felt ready or just wanted to take a chance, then we would bring the play. As we began traveling to communities across the South, the trick became how to get black and white working class and poor people to attend. In the main, such folks don't hang out together, much less go to professional theater. We knew if we didn't get such folks in the house - no matter how popular the drama might be with others (and it was) - then we had failed.

After exhausting our array of aforementioned promotional strategies, including getting the word out to places like barbershops and bars where politics are discussed, we hit on an idea: Every community wishing to present *Junebug/Jack* would have to agree to form an ecumenical community choir to perform in the show. Reflecting each community's diversity, this new choir might include singers from the black churches, choir members from the white churches, singers from the women's chorus, maybe others from the high school glee club. Several months before we arrived, each newly formed community chorus received the show's music

and designated a chorus master to conduct evening rehearsals. A few days before the opening performance, as the director, I staged the chorus into the show.

A lot of things happened in the course of this process. For starters, the play's presenter had to begin thinking about the whole community while pulling the chorus together. The singers didn't volunteer to discuss race and class – they came together because they loved to sing, and this professional play looked like a good opportunity to shine. In the course of rehearsing the music, they naturally hit on a sound that had never been heard in the community, simply because all those different talents had never been joined before – and certainly not to sing beautifully crafted, down to earth songs about the cruelty, heartache, and paradoxes of 400 years of race and class struggle. In this way, *Junebug/Jack* would swell from a professional cast of six to twenty or more. And I can assure you that the community's participation only raised the artistic quality of the production – how much local talent goes unappreciated for lack of a meaningful book and finely crafted musical score!

When the show opened, a cross-section of the entire community was present. It didn't hurt that all the churches had to come out in support of their people. Because the performances enabled everyone to feel confident about their own traditions, cultural chips fell off shoulders. All became eager to witness and to learn more about the "other" traditions: to experience how the black people sang, or how the white people sang, or what inflections young people brought to the song.

Performing *Junebug/Jack* in New Orleans in 1997 to launch a statewide tour, the ecumenical community choir was thirty-two strong. What a magnificent

procession they made swaying down the church aisle in a converted bowling alley singing “This Little Light of Mine.” At the conclusion of the performance, the church’s powerful preacher asked the five hundred audience members to bow their heads as she led a prayer for our safe keeping. This was encouraging because earlier that week Klan leader David Duke had been stirring things up in the communities we were about to visit.

In the days after these community performances (and much like the two ensembles had done in creating the play), audience members were invited to join circles to tell personal stories about the dynamics of race and class in their community. With a newfound permission based on trust, they told each other stories that were typically complex, hard, and emotional – and untold before in “mixed” company. In *Junebug/Jack* the biggest catharsis didn't occur during the play but in the community's telling of its own stories.



Jewish and Arab Israeli teenagers and first year Acting MFAs meet on the stage of Illinois Shakespeare Theatre to share personal stories about “what makes me, me.” Roadside's artistic director Dudley Cocke facilitates.

Inspired by the effect of these stories on a community's sense of itself and its possibilities, Roadside began developing a community cultural development methodology built on active participation; partnerships and collaborations with an inclusive range of community organizations; local leadership; knowing when to lead and when to follow; and engagement over the course of at least several years. In the best instances, local grassroots arts organizations became established as a result of such residencies, and Roadside found itself with new performance ensembles ready to collaborate. One of the best examples is the Zuni language theater Idiwanan An Chawe, with which Roadside continues to create and tour new plays.

In 1981, when the Reagan administration came into power, it understood that who controls the culture controls the story the nation tells itself, and that artists are powerful storytellers. The right wing's long-standing insistence on the primacy of the elite western European canon began to gain new traction.

The administration's game plan was to quickly shut down the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities and then the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

Because these federal agencies were so clearly funded by the people's tax money, they were more sensitive to equal opportunity than private foundations, and as the largest annual sponsor of the nonprofit arts and humanities, they played a leadership role setting the nation's *de facto* culture policy.

Closing those agencies turned out to be a tougher job than anticipated, but in 1995 the National Endowment for the Arts discontinued grants to individual performing artists. In 1997, it discontinued its discipline-based programs, including the civil rights-inspired Expansion Arts Program, a significant source of funding for

rural, working class, and non-white organizations. The impact of this 1997 decision remains generally unreported. Both were significant victories for the right wing, giving permission to private donors and arts presenters to turn away from the principle of inclusion and the ideal of cultural equity. The result was less resolve among artists to confront public issues, like race and class. Most problematically, without federal support national conversations about culture policy began to evaporate, and in the void nonprofits hunkered down to fight for their own. Divide and conquer appeared to have carried the day.

Most of the grassroots arts and humanities organizations of any size (one million dollar annual budgets or more) founded in the activist zeitgeist of the 1960s and '70s no longer exist. Appalshop is one of the last, where once it stood beside and collaborated with the likes of the SNCC-inspired Free Southern Theater in New Orleans, Inner City Arts in Watts, CA, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center in San Antonio, and numerous others. The repercussions of this shift in culture policy soon were felt in the communities where artists work.



Corn Mountain/Pine Mountain performance  
Whitesburg, KY, 1996.

In 1998 as part of Arizona State University's three-year "Untold Stories" project, Roadside created a performance that brought together two groups of Native American dancers (Zuni and Pima), a popular Chicano solo artist, and Roadside.

The performance was in Scottsdale's Kerr Cultural Center, which had been built as a private concert hall for Mrs. Kerr and was now owned by Arizona State University. Issues with comp tickets were the first warning sign. The box office was getting uptight, which was perplexing because there was going to be plenty of room for everyone. About an hour before the performance, we noticed there were ten or so people waiting outside in the cold, and when we tried to invite them into the lobby, Kerr's management said that was strictly forbidden for another 30 minutes. We recognized many of those waiting outside from the popular play we had made with Arizona State University's "classified" employees – maintenance personnel, kitchen staff, secretaries, and receptionists. (The play was titled *Highly Classified* and was supported by the workers' union, which arranged with the university's administration for compensatory work time for its members to participate in its creation and performances.) Unsure of Kerr etiquette, the "highly classified" had arrived more than an hour early in case "adjustments" needed to be made. When the time came to open the doors, management refused until one of the performers tuning his banjo cleared the stage. Unconcerned with a fourth wall, Roadside often chooses to tune instruments and banter with the audience before the performance commences.

We next noticed that the foster care kids from the Boys and Girls Club, who had been part of the "Untold Stories" project from its inception and who arrived excited and all dressed up, were being directed to bleachers in the far back, furthest from the stage. Kerr management said this was a strategy to quickly eject them should they act-up. In Appalachian, Native American, and Chicano cultures, the

elderly and the children are always given places of honor in the front, but at Kerr, the best seats were reserved for the patrons with the season tickets. They were down on floor level in an odd reversal of what would have been the pit in Shakespearean times. None of the other audience was allowed down there with them.

As the hour struck for the performance to begin, the theater was alive as the 120 or so Latino, Native American, and other newcomers to the Kerr Cultural Arts Center hugged each other and exchanged news. It was indeed a happening. Five minutes after the appointed performance hour, a Kerr staff member ordered that the performance begin immediately, and when I replied that it already had, I could tell she thought I was making fun of her. And so the evening played itself out as a contest between the majority of the audience in league with the performers, and the patrons in league with Kerr management.

The performance ended with a traditional southwestern Native American “Split Circle” dance. As the boys and girls from the bleachers rushed down to participate and were joined by most everyone else, the Kerr patrons remained seated. The joyous dance swirled around them. With their refusal to join the fun, the patrons seemed to be saying, “We feel excluded, and we own this space and it is not right for us to feel excluded in our own home.” They didn’t comprehend they were in a public university’s public space and that the purpose of the “Untold Stories Festival” was to bring different people together to share their common humanity.

In fall 2013, I attended the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Free Southern Theater (FST), the progenitor of Junebug Productions. The celebration

brought activists and artists of different ages and backgrounds together with civil rights veterans, who as young men and women in the 1960s put their lives on the line for freedom. Often described as the theater wing of the civil rights movement, the Free Southern Theater was founded in 1963 at Tougaloo College in Mississippi by Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee members.



Free Southern Theater Logo

Many people, especially younger people, presently want to learn about the role of art in the struggle for justice, and one of their barriers is inadequate access to the practice and theory of social justice-minded artists working in the last century and before. How do people learn from the work of rural grassroots theater in New York State from 1918-1960, and the national "Little Theater" movement it started? What inspiration lies undiscovered in the 40 years of touring beginning in 1900 to thousands of Hispanic communities across the U.S. by Virginia Fabregas, her company, and a full orchestra? What example is there in the New York City African Company, formalized in 1821, producing Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *The Drama of King Shotaway*, which called for a U.S. slave rebellion? And what lesson in New York City authorities declaring the company a public nuisance and closing it two years later? These examples, among countless that could be cited, raise the question: What would a strategy to reclaim the democratic heritage of the American theater look like?

The FST anniversary reminded us that a new populist movement like that represented by the civil rights movement will have to span race and class in an authentic grassroots way and draw on the strengths of both classical conservative and liberal political philosophy. Such a movement will have to dodge being co-opted by any ideology that knocks out conversation across the lines that presently divide. For solidarity to emerge, we will need to have more patience with one another as we attempt to understand fundamental questions like what constitutes freedom of expression.

SNCC activists used to say, “When people don’t have anything to do, they do each other.” As we reel from 30 years of unrelenting anti-democratic pressure to silence all but the messages of powerful elites, there’s been a lot of “doing each other” in the nonprofit arts sector, in our social justice field, and in our networks and organizations. We’ve painted ourselves into many separate corners, and it will be messy getting out of them. But that’s what we need to do, and what can help us is the rekindling of critical discourse. First among ourselves, we need to face unresolved issues and animosities and settle them based on principles we agree to share. In 1960, the enemy, Jim Crow, was known. To effectively move forward, we must come to understand who the enemy is now. I think we can only understand that collectively, through an iterative, dialogical process committed to building and sharpening each other.

In the spring of 1964, President Lyndon Johnson launched the War on Poverty from the front porch of the Fletcher family in eastern Kentucky. Today in some Appalachian counties 40% of residents live below the poverty line. Despite

more than a century of persistent economic poverty, Appalachian people have kept their complex cultural traditions alive. To stay for decades on the cultural battlefield, one has to remember that culture – the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and material traditions and features of a people – is the crucible in which our individual and collective Being is formed. In this way culture is more powerful than money or politics. Art is fabricated from culture and has only the moral compass with which artists and audiences imbue it.

## About the Book

### From the **Introduction**:

[The Routledge Companion to Art and Politics](#) offers a thorough examination of the complex relationship between art and politics, and the many forms and approaches the engagement between them can take.

The contributors – a diverse assembly of artists, activists, and scholars from around the world – discuss and demonstrate ways of making art and politics legible and salient in the world. As such, the 32 chapters in this volume reflect on performing and visual arts, music, film, and new media; as well as covering social practice, community-based work, conceptual, interventionist, and movement-affiliated forms.

The companion is divided into four distinct parts:

- Conceptual Cartographies
- Institutional Materialities
- Modalities of Practice
- Making Publics

Randy Martin has assembled a collection that ensures that readers will come away with a wider view of what can count as art and politics; where they might find it; and how it moves in the world. The diversity of perspectives is at once challenging and fortifying to those who might dismiss political art on the one hand as not making sufficient difference and on the other to those embracing it but seeking a means to elaborate the significance that it can make in the world.

From this universalizing perspective, art would be humanistic in scope, transcendent in reach, and masterful in value. Partnership to a class or cause would purportedly compromise art's generalizability to represent the aspirations of all of humanity, and therefore political art would be sequestered to a kind of genre, and one whose external demands would already compromise the inner pursuit of creativity's unbridled truth. If the pressures of the political compromised artistic possibility from achieving its full flower on its own grounds and conditions, the formulation of a clear boundary between what belonged to art and what was outside it would leave that very relationship passive and superficial. Accordingly, art would reflect society as if the stable and immutable partition between the two was made from a mirror. The esthetic offered itself as a realm of contemplation, a protected sphere where beauty could be discovered and displayed. Art would lay itself bare to be gazed upon, would shine back the light that was directed toward it, but lacked agency to negotiate its relation to the world let alone reconfigure worldly sensibilities.

Without doubt, strands of this Victorianism persist, whereby a separation of human activities is rendered into distinct and mutually exclusive spheres of public and private objective and subjective, male and female, scientific and esthetic values. Yet it was even at its height fragile and selective – contested by all manner of avant-gardes and alterities, mass and popular expressions, complicated genealogies of race, class, sexuality, gender, religiosity, ethnicity, and self-constituting cultural identities. This complexity informs an abiding paradox: artists are at once undervalued, marginalized, dismissed and at the same time treated as the bellwether of morality, the source of potentially contagious excess of expression, the authentic challenge made by free-willed individuals to political authority. Art is in short too weak to support itself and too strong to be left unanswered. It must be patronized in the double sense of being subsidized and condescended to by those who recognize the true worth it cannot obtain for itself in the high court of the marketplace where prices are discovered and value is disclosed to the world. At the same time, this delicate expression incapable of speaking for itself must be censored by those who see in it a voice of fundamental values that might compete with their own monopolistic claims to grasp those expressions supportive of the proper order of things.

If art makes a world, it does so not simply for itself but for others. Increasingly, questions of co-creation, audience participation, public or civic engagement have become vital dimensions of artistic endeavor but also of an expanded sense of politics, esthetic or otherwise. How to figure these matters of representation, delegation, efficacy, transformation, enhancement of critical capacity and what exactly constitutes the work of publics, or the valuation of community begins to describe a wider arc of reception than simple meaning making. If art makes legible what publics might need and desire, what knowledges and embodiments are valued and what society moves toward, its politicality cannot be derived from its own form

but from the debts, longings, and imaginings it unfurls and enfolds among larger populations.