American Assembly Meeting
"The Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education"
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Thoughts on Art, Truth, and Higher Education

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This American Assembly is built on our faith in the two-way street of sustenance between the performing arts and higher education. It's our answer to the question posed by Lee Bollinger: "Who, or which institutions, outside of the usual free market, will assume responsibility for the health and vitality of contemporary culture?" [i]

Universities, with their arts-presenting organizations, their faculties in and outside of the arts, and---not to be forgotten---their students, can be and are seedbeds of culture and the creative process itself. They are essential for the future of the arts, as Douglas Dempster has observed, because the single strongest predictor of an adult's involvement with the arts, either as a consumer or practitioner, is not childhood exposure, affluence, or heritage. It is formal educational attainment and the exposure to arts and culture that education normally brings.[ii]

At the same time, the arts, which I would define in their most inclusive form as "expressive culture," can help higher education create the contexts of exchange between people and ideas that are necessary to tackle some of society's most intractable problems, starting with the affirmation of difference and the embracing of inter-group dialogue.[iii]

In introducing the Assembly, Alberta Arthurs and Sandra Gibson described the two-way street of nurturance between higher education and the performing arts by noting that each makes its "own specific offerings to a vital and thriving modern culture," but together, "the two sectors do more than either can do alone to deepen the *aesthetic experiences and the learning*,

the expansion of mind and spirit, that each aims for (my italics)." [iv] Many others here have spoken and written eloquently(in the Assembly's preparatory materials) about deepening the aesthetic experiences through our partnerships.

I want to take a few moments tonight to walk the two-way street, starting from the core purposes of higher education: to make discoveries that change lives and to prepare better citizens for our collective future. How does the training, sustaining, and presenting of the arts in higher education serve, as Barbara White so beautifully captured it, to cultivate the garden of – "experience-oriented imaginative space," in ways that give us hope about our collective future?[v]

Art, Truth, and Liberal Education

Pablo Picasso once observed, "We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand."[vi]

As we consider the arts and higher education, it's worth keeping in mind that universities pursue the truths of this world in many places, in the laboratory, in the classroom, in the studio, in the library, in the community, in the theater, on the internet, in the concert hall, in the coffee shop.

And when we speak of the goals of higher education, which include giving our undergraduates a liberal education, we realize that we cannot predict with any accuracy, just what the truths of their lives—the ethical issues, the political challenges, the personal configurations of their families or workplaces—will be in a world that is changing so quickly. We think instead in terms of engaging with our students in Barbara White's experience-oriented imaginative space, enabling a habit of mind and spirit that prepares them for anything and sustains them no matter what.

I believe that students need to be both playful and responsible[vii]—in other words, bold enough, at this stage of their lives, to experiment with ideas, attitudes, and possible truths about the world—to experience creativity – and responsible in their recognition of contemporary realities facing the diverse communities in which they can live and work productively.

The arts can play a central role in this work, this cultivation. If we in higher education care about making our students both creative and resilient, the arts should be at the core of our educational mission, the medium as well as the object of exchange.

We are at the dawn of what might be described as an era of "cultural computing," in which the rapid development and spread of new technologies is effecting a huge growth and change in the domain of the arts, just as new research in understanding different types of intelligence (visual, aural, kinesthetic) is bringing about greater appreciation of their value. As Eric Booth writes, "We are discovering that artistic engagement does something catalytic to a learner."[viii]

In what has become a "knowledge economy," we are hearing about the rise of a "creative class" in American society. In higher education, my hope is that all of our graduates will belong to that class.

Art as the Medium of Vibrant Exchange

To my mind, the excellence of universities lies in the vibrant exchange of people and ideas that should take place within them. That excellence depends on constituting ourselves in ways that keep that vibrancy alive and refreshed through the luxury we have to think new thoughts, meet new people, and change our minds.

As Lewis Thomas, the great cell biologist, once wrote: "Our great advantage over all other social animals is that we possess the kind of brain that permits us to change our minds. We are not obliged, as ants are, to follow genetic blueprints for every last detail of our behavior. Our genes are more cryptic and ambiguous in their instructions: Get along, says our DNA, talk to each other, figure out the world, be useful, and above all keep an eye out for affection."[ix] In other words, at the core of what we can do as human beings is to mix it up, challenge our expertise with others' experiences, others' languages, others' insights.

George Kelly, one of my scholarly "grandfathers," called this decidedly human proclivity for reinvention, "constructive alternativism,"[x] which is what I mean by encouraging an attitude of playfulness (of seeing possibilities, experiencing the world and ourselves from alternative vantage points) in our students and in our work. (Parenthetically, it is why we

framed the University of Michigan's defense of affirmative action around the educational benefits of diversity.) In creating our imaginative spaces, we should always strive for a diversity of people and ideas that, if it doesn't quite lead us to the Zen monk's "emptying our cup of our own opinions"[xi] (as Barbara White hopes), at least tempers our readiness to surge ahead in the deep assurance of ignorance.

As a medium or context of exchange, art provides the perfect antidote to our arrogance, our habits of mind, and our expertise. It encourages, as Thea Petchler notes in her essay on the experimental arts, an orientation toward work that turns the studio into a laboratory, art into science (and, one would hope, science into art).[xii] As Steven Tepper has observed, "Creative outbursts throughout history, like the Renaissance in Florence, have clustered in those places where artistic, scientific, and technological advancements thrive side by side."[xiii] Surely this is part of what occurred when Barbara White's class staged their Happening.[xiv]

Training Artists in the Usual and the Unusual

As Thomas Pollak, Mark Hager, and Elizabeth Rowland have observed in the *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, "the role of arts on campus extends beyond the classroom or studio curriculum."[xv] And when we think about the ways we train artists, we should be open to the dramatic changes that can arise when we mix up experts and novices, old and young, scientists and artists. We should create contexts of exchange that prepare artists (and non-artists alike) to see and experience the world differently, perhaps (but not exclusively) via new technologies which stretch and expand the boundaries of time, space, property, intimacy, and public debate.

At Illinois, for example, we have created the Seedbed Initiative,[xvi] which hopes to explore the human experience through art and technology, drawing on Smart technologies that can provide high-resolution visualization of massive data sets to image such phenomena as colliding galaxies and complex global weather patterns and can also, through sensors and virtual reality provide new dimensions for performance art. One of many possibilities is an opera in which there is a conductor but no live orchestra musicians, and in which there are both live and virtual singer-actors performing in an environment of both physical and virtual reality.

The initiative is also taking another look at the fundamental assumptions and debates that have accompanied artistic activity and interpretation for many years, such as those regarding the nature of art and the role of arts in society, with studies that range from an investigation of pure creativity to the study and development of public cultural policy. We are asking questions, too: How can marginalized communities use these new tools to represent their cultures, communicate with one and other and with those outside their communities? The contexts for these communities can be local or international, interdisciplinary and intergenerational.

Consider for example the thriving multimedia exchange embodied in a traveling exhibit/installation which was curated by Robin Held at the Henry Art Gallery of the University of Washington's Museum of Modern Art, in affiliation with the Berkeley Art Museum, at the University of California at Berkeley. It's called "Generating Gene(sis): A Contemporary Art Exhibition for the "Genomic Age." It has its own website,[xvii] and is on exhibit at the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota until May 2 and will then open September 10 at the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University.

"Generating Gene(sis)" is the result of three and a half years of collaboration between working artists, scientists, historians, bio-ethicists, representatives of the biotechnology industry, and museum professionals, who have been engaged in an ongoing dialogue about the potential meanings and impact of current genomic research.

It includes humorous commentary, theatrical installations, documentary images, pseudo (or actual) scientific laboratory situations, and it draws on the power of contemporary art to provoke, question, and to articulate new paradigms.

In one of the exhibits, entitled "DNAid™ Cups,"[xviii] Creative Time, a public art organization based in New York, commissioned five artists to design coffee cups with messages that address the implications of today's genetic research. The cups, in which serious issues were addressed in the form of DNA jokes, were distributed in cafes and delis to reach a more diverse audience than one might find within a museum.

With the internet, with electronic archives and performances, there are very few boundaries of time, space, and status. Our imaginative space seems limitless.

Moving our Exchanges Back and Forth

Indeed, as we think about the role of the performing arts and artists on campus and in the community, we realize that we are moving the boundaries of campus-community engagement to a "third space," the place between campus and community that represents a *partnership* that moves back and forth, doing its work both on campus and in the community. And, this brings me to how we sustain these vital exchanges.

This is critical to a vision of art that is infused throughout the scholarly and educational life of the institution, as well as the community. The "ivory tower" is no longer ivory (with diverse participants, including community members, many generations, and diverse demography) nor is it a tower (with an interweaving of scholarship and presentation, of art and science, of living and learning and performing).

One of the most fundamental aspects of this vision is that public artistic engagement begins *on campus.* Through the gathering together of scholars and performers, of generations and of neighbors, it is possible to at once solidify and invigorate community traditions in the arts and to draw on the community's expertise in the arts.

As just one example, the African-American community in Champaign, Illinois has been home to many outstanding jazz artists. This year, in a program called Jazz Threads, a partnership between the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts on campus and at least 40 local jazz artists and advocates, we are celebrating the grand legacy of jazz in Champaign and its possibilities in the future of our community.[xix]

"Hometown jazz heroes," such as the renowned jazz trumpet player Cecil Bridgewater, are coming home to give performances and classes on campus and in the community, for "students" of all ages. This is a very ambitious project built around the affirmation of and inspiration that comes from these local heroes and this local history.

At the same time, Jazz Threads has turned out to provide a powerful context for exchange about the very painful history of racism, discrimination, and prejudice both in our community and on our campus. By embracing the self-critical stance of this artistic exchange, the way is opened to build community going forward.

This is the kind of exchange that crosses generations, gives everyone standing in the conversation, and can take place in the "safe haven" of the concert hall and then move to the marketplace of our local jazz clubs.[xx] It has been an ongoing conversation, going back and forth, both celebratory and open to the critical eye, as challenging, entertaining, and invigorating as jazz itself. There is a distinct air of serendipity about the process.

As Barbara White points out in her essay "Save You're Money," the value of the arts "cannot be reduced to bottom-line figures, to easily calculable causes and effects." There must be a willingness to be "purposefully purposeless, to imagine the unimaginable, to make use of uselessness." The arts, as she writes "encourage us to reserve a space for the unruly, the unpredictable, and the unforeseen."[xxi]

Celebrating and Criticizing

Consideration of the unruliness and unpredictability of art as a context for exchange, brings us to why these exchanges are so essential to liberal education. It brings us to the questions that Alberta (Arthurs) and Sandra (Gibson) have posed about the impact of presenting art to and by our students. That impact, I believe, can be considerable in offering an opportunity to see ourselves from another perspective, to celebrate our experience and criticize what we don't know, and maybe change our minds.

Here I return to George Kelly and to Lewis Thomas, reminding us of what we already know: We in the academy are just as prone as others to under-realize our human potential to "get to know each other" and to "change our minds." To the contrary, college campuses, despite the best of intentions, embody and manifest most of the hurt and intransigence associated with difference in our society. [How, one might ask, could it be otherwise, when we and our students come to campus from neighborhoods segregated by ethnicity, race, religion, and economics?] As an academic leader and a social psychologist, I have a confession to make – nothing in my finely-honed expertise gives me confidence in my ability to change this

reality, and that is why I put my faith in the impact of art and artistic exchange on university campuses.

In this regard, permit me to end my comments tonight with a short story, a tale of "honor" and "dishonor," of discordant experiences and failures in the search for affection. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign has an "Indian" mascot (actually I am supposed to refer to it as a school symbol), Chief Illiniwek, that brings tears to the eyes of thousands of students, alums and friends as he dances at half-time, and tears to the eyes of countless other students, faculty, and friends who feel devalued and offended by the same dance/apparition. The debate surrounding the Chief is fierce, seemingly endless, and sometimes brutally off-putting. I have experienced it firsthand as my family and I drive past the 12 foot by 25 foot billboards in town that read: RETAIN THE CHIEF; RETURN CANTOR. Nothing seems to work in this debate.

Proponents of the Chief see no reason to distinguish their experience of the Chief ---as uplifting, and exciting, and honoring something---from the experiences of those who perceive the Chief differently. And, more to the point, because the Chief, in their eyes, is not *intended* to be hurtful, they feel no need to analyze the impact it has on others.

What is that impact? Well here is what one member of the American Indian Center in Chicago, had to say when he came to campus in January: "We are not mascots. We are people. There's a hurt there that people don't feel or see. They're falsifying our traditions. We don't do this stuff for entertainment."

What is fundamental to a liberal education is that a person understands the gap between intentions and impact. And, just as important, that an educated person takes responsibility for the possibility that others have an experience different from the one they cherish. Supporters of the Chief are not evil people, they aren't unusual, and they aren't different from us. It just so happens that they grew up loving something that is very hurtful to others. We have all, as the saying goes, "been there, done that."

Why am I telling you this story? Because, amidst my deepest discouragement over this intractable debate, I watched and listened to Sherman Alexie, the remarkable poet, comic, film-maker, novelist, on campus the other night, and I realized so powerfully the transformative

effect of artistic exchange, especially as it touches the places where we fail so miserably in our search for affection or truth. Here's one of his stories, autobiographical in genesis:

"Last night I missed two free throws which would have won the game against the best team in the state. The farm town high school I play for is nicknamed the "Indians," and I'm probably the only actual Indian ever to play for a team with such a mascot."

"This morning, I pick up the sports page and read the headline: Indians Lose Again."

"Go ahead and tell me none of this is supposed to hurt me very much."[xxii]

An institution of higher education, if it does anything well, should stand for getting people to exchange perspectives, to have empathy of mind. This does not mean there's one real experience, one truth—but it does mean there are many experiences, and it matters where you are positioned. People have to take that context into account.

This is one thing the arts, including literature, are about. They can put us in the minds, the sensibilities, the experiences of others, in an intimate way. I can't promise that Sherman Alexie succeeded in doing that for all the listeners in Champaign, but I sure know that we haven't. Art can do it; so I have some hope – if not about the Chief, at least about liberal education.

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[i] Lee Bollinger, Speech to the Association of Arts Presenters on January 13, 2002, p. 1, included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.

[ii] Douglas Dempster, "American Medicis: Training and Patronizing Professional Artists in American Universities, p. 23 , included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.

[iii] Nancy Cantor, "Moving Together: The Arts in Higher Education," Speech at 2003 Charles Fowler Colloquium on October 21, 2003, p. 4, included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.

[iv] Alberta Arthurs and Sandra Gibson, "Introduction: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," p.1 , included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.
[v] Barbara White, "Save You're Money [*sic*], Spend Your Art: Cultivating Imaginative Space on Campus," p. 6, included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.
[vi] Pablo Picasso, in an interview with Marius DeZayas, published in *The Arts*, 3:315-26, May, 1923, and reprinted in *Picasso; Fifty Years of His Art*, by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. New York: Simon and Schuster for The Museum of Modern Art, 1946, p. 270.
[vii] Nancy Cantor and Steven Schomberg, "What we want students to learn: Cultivating playfulness and responsibility in liberal education," *Change*, November/December 2002, p.47-49.
[viii] Eric Booth, "Expanding the Range of Essential Skills of 21st Century Artists," p. 4, included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.
[ix] Lewis Thomas, "Man's Role on Earth," *The New York Times Magazine*, April 1, 1984, pp. 36-37.
[x] George A. Kelly, *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*. New York: Norton, 1963, pp. 3-45.
[xi] White, *op. cit*., p. 4.
[xii] Thea Petchler, "The Postwar University and the Experimental Performing Arts," p.3, included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.
[xiii] Steven J. Tepper, "The Creative Campus: How Do We Measure Up?", p. 7, included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.
[xiv] Barbara White, *op. cit*., pp. 4-7.
[xv] Thomas Pollak, Mark A. Hager, and Elizabeth Rowland, "University Arts Programs and Local Communities: A Report on a Pilot Study," *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, Vol. 30, No. 2, Summer 2000, p. 147, included in "Creative Campus: The Training, Sustaining, and Presenting of the Performing Arts in American Higher Education," the 104th American Assembly, March 11-13, 2004, Arden House, Harriman New York.
[xvi] See website at http://www.uiuc.edu/initiatives/artsintech.html
[xvii] See the website at http://www.gene-sis.net/home.html
[xviii] See website at http://www.gene-sis.net/artists_creativetime.html
[xix] See website at http://www.kcpa.uiuc.edu/jazz/
[xx] Nancy Cantor and Steven Schomberg, "Poised between two worlds: The university as monastery and marketplace," *EDUCAUSE Review*, March/April 2003, p.12-21.
[xxi] Barbara White, op cit., p. 2.
[xxii] Sherman Alexie, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven*, New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1993, p. 179.