Symposium: *Re-Imagining Self and Other: Creativity and Ethical Action in the Aftermath of Violence*

Friday, October 15, 2004

**Welcome and Gathering of the Fellows and Symposium Presenters**

Below are notes from a conversation between the Brandeis International Fellows and [symposium presenters](#) in which they discussed and reflected upon the question "what is art?" and how it relates to their work. Participants included Lena Slachmijlder, Jonathan Fox, Goenawan Mohamad, Iffat Fatima, Barbara Sonneborn, Ly Daravuth, Cindy Cohen, Bev Hosking, Kim Berman, and Hizkias Assefa.

**What is art?**

**Lena:** What is it about that question that interests and concerns us? We know that art is an expression of creativity? Are we questioning creativity versus manipulation?

**Jonathan:** That is my question. We have more than the focus of art; we have a focus of reconciliation. So the concern is - is art being used for propaganda? I am thinking about Goenawan's answer yesterday about poetry that awakes us to the difference. There is something in the goals of art that is compatible with reconciliation.

**Goenawan:** The idea "of arts for arts sake" comes from France… the right for power to speak. "Arts for arts sake" --the slogan also is a form of subversion. It is a way of using language to talk about the abstract.

There is a loss of meaning in art when it is manipulated. The Walls of France play…. artists are like politicians...you have to look at what they do instead of what they say. The purpose is to swim against the stream.

The river is a perfect metaphor because it flows. When you step into it - it is different water. You also cannot have the river without the bank that holds it. Empty yourself and let the art flow through you. See what emerges then….

**Iffat:** Art is open to meaning. To what extent do you leave the meaning open? It depends on your own experience and how you "read" it. How do you facilitate the meaning? In film, especially documentary, how much do you tell? How much is open?

**Barbara:** We are moving into talking about the kind of art we are dealing with. Poets against the War is an example. It is a reflection of a feeling that is overwhelming. There is a need for expression that is not intellectual. It is a medium for a reflection of what the problems are. Words are better to describe, but we also need to move out of our intellect. Some arts express the agony of a situation. The problem in a documentary film is how explicit to make the meaning.
**Lena:** If you are making a movie to elicit something, then you have to have integrity with your self about what you are trying to say. Or perhaps the purpose is to raise the questions and allow people to find their own answers. It is not manipulation to raise the question or to have an intention. It is raising the question.

**Daravuth:** The context is important. In Cambodia there is no word to say "art." In the 50’s a word was created. We have very few words that enclose everything. We do have words for people who do something… like a sculptor. Now you can say you are an artist before you say what you do. Do I do art? Do I do a documentary? The process is important.

**Iffat:** "Rasa" is the creation of the juices.

**Daravuth:** The magical thing is in the creation of the art. We have the need to put something into a word. What is part of the beauty of Barbara’s movie is what is not there. Sometimes art becomes a commodity. When we try to market it, or make it a formula, we lose it.

**Cindy:** The forms of expression have changed a great deal with the emergence of literacy. Before literacy, expression was held in the community. There is something in the magic, the creativity, held in a collective. There is alienation when that is missing.

**Jonathan:** I found that question interesting. Drumming may or may not be art… it is cultural expression, but, is it art? Art has a connotation of something original. Traditional forms are not aiming for something original. A traditional form will have the "rasa"-the creation of juices.

**Iffat:** What keeps me open is working with the camera. The connection with "other" that I experience with the camera…the state of being with the camera… it opens things up. The process is wonderful.

**Barbara:** Is it expression?

**Iffat:** It is connection…with the process.

**Goenawan:** Originality and creativity.

**Hizkias:** I don't understand where the connection comes from. I connect deeply with people and I don't know where it comes from. There is no agenda for it, but there are things that happen. But, it is a transformative time. There is a lot of "aha"-so this is possible; we can see each other in a different way. I think it is connection. I find it very difficult to say what it is. I have tremendous fear when I get into a conflict situation - when I don't know anything, but then it may become the deepest, the most wonderful proces. The fact that it happens, it gives me the hope that it can happen again.

**Barbara:** And when that happens it is deeply creative…

**Bev:** We are trying to write about this. How do you articulate these sorts of moments? Even to train others to do it is also difficult. I always relate to the terror, when there is such an unknown
Barbara: The way that one became an artist was through an apprenticeship. You sit at the knee to learn. But it is really beyond words what happens. We try to describe that which isn't describable.

I want to answer the question of how much do you say. I wanted to leave people uncomfortable. I expect the film leaves you unfinished.

Kim: What is our responsibility as art educators?

Goenawan: Humanity. The audience is a co-creator.

Lena: So we are helping them find their own creativity. A lot of our own work is about helping others to unleash the creativity in themselves. Helping them to remember their own creativity allows them to also to find other spaces to solve other issues. What interests me is this….it is not about teaching them to sing but to find their voice.

Iffat: There is that moment of displacement. As artists, we have power, but we can shift the power to empower the audience. It is an attempt to equalize the relationship.

Daravuth: Can you be neutral? As soon as you do something, you already say something. The role of facilitator or medium--the role of connecting. What is the role of media…with intention or without? Maybe the intention is an honorable one. I am concerned about the "other." What is the ethical value of art? I think we do have to say that. If connection is what you want, then it is very difficult because you can never be sure that it will happen. The minute I accept that I can feel I can achieve much. What do I want to achieve?

Jonathan: The artist does face all the time the agony of failure. I want to talk about ritual. Where there is a ritual element to an event, the ritual can create a heightened dramatic event where there is a zone of ambiguity. In that moment there is danger and possibility. Maybe the repetition also allows the openness of space that allows for possibility.

Lena: I trust art as a way to get from "A" to B" and I don't hide that I want to get from "A" to "B." Others may not trust it because of the terror of the open space. How can we trust more in art…in the artistic expression? In the way we facilitate and communicate, and enable others to trust it more. There are many who have never participated in an opportunity for a creative space--don't know what it will unleash. The process of drawing a memory is not something that you won't be able to manage.

Goenawan: Do you think that being an audience is creative? Being involved in recreating what you encounter?
**Kim:** I try to demystify art. We teach skills that allow for the creativity… the example of papermaking, the process of making the paper. We are teaching an art process that empowers them to make something, to express something.

**Hizkias:** Art as a concept is frightening. It excludes me. In my language art is translated as drawing. What can we do through this medium to achieve a certain purpose? I can connect to that. Every aspect of life is trying to make meaning of this reality we call life. If we can't label it then it does not exist. But we also can't label it…