

A Memory of Arts for Social Change

“A process cannot be understood by stopping it. Understanding must move with the flow of the process, must join it and flow with it.”

- Frank Herbert

Introduction

A description of one's practice is a difficult thing to write. It implies a summing up, a natural end, and a neat bow tied around things. This is not what I see when I look at Erik Ehn's political performance class, which I took this semester. Like all good art, I won't know the real effect of this class until a long time from now. It needs to sit inside my mind for a while, quietly changing the backdrop.

Maybe I'm looking at this wrong. Maybe I'm looking at this wrong. This is not an academic paper or an evaluation of the class. If opening night is a report on the process and if this is the opening night of What Comes Next, then maybe this is a report on a process.

What Will You Change?

We were challenged to answer the question, "What Will You Change?" My simple answer is: myself. Because of this class my practice has changed, widened its scope and deepened its understanding.

Art for Social Justice

Art for Social Change

Arts Education

Community Art

Community-based art

Life Long Learning

Applied Art

Political Art

Political Performance

The work I've made has found a lot of labels and those labels all have some truth in them. It's all the same work from where I stand. But names have power and I'll use the one that works for you.

My involvement in the arts has always been as much about arts management as it has been about creative practice. I never really understood what "my practice" was, even if I knew how to talk about it when asked. The answer to the question of "my practice" now seems a little clearer. My practice is just my work and it all ties into the same vision of arts for social change. And that is something I've always been clear on. This class has set "my practice" in a broader landscape than I knew before. I knew that the broader world of arts for social change existed and I knew it was happening out there, somewhere. Now I feel more connected to it. Whether it's through the lens of DAH Theatre, Circus Amok, or the International Theatre of the Oppressed Organization, I can now see where my work fits in internationally and not just in the UK (or London) bubble. So my practice will change. I don't know exactly how yet, but I'll know it when I see it. And through that change, maybe some change will take place in the world, in a way that I want to see.

This class has challenged some of my previous artistic choices and for that I'm grateful. Was my London festival a "state-facilitated safe space for catharsis," where older citizens express their creativity in safe ways and then go back to their old ways of life, appeased but ultimately not changed? Maybe. The festival was certainly "civic" - and is this where I want to situate myself as an artist and a maker? Maybe not. The class has caused me to delve deeper into why I do this work: what is motivating me? A visiting social entrepreneur in another class commented as he left the room that you shouldn't make your work out of anger or from guilt. Anger will drive people away, guilt will lead you to patriarchal views of people with whom one works. I've come to understand that although it's important to know how you got into the work, it's more important to know you can transcend those reasons if you need to and work from a healthy and nurturing passion.

I don't know where I will end up working once I leave Brown, and I'm not going to pretend to make definitive decisions now. Family, life, and school will open up some doors and close some others. But I can ensure that I'll take my newly developed practice with me and act on what I've learned.

This is not the end point. This is a moment in a journey.

Manifesto

But let's not be too vague. There's more going on here than semantic noise, and this class has been more than just another project. I thought I wanted to write **A Manifesto** to be my final output, but Rule Number One would say: There Is No Dogma. So much for that. There are, however, things here that I learned and which I want to keep. So, here's my **Anti-Manifesto** - with no small nod of the head to Kerouac, the Cult of Done, the class, Erik Ehn, and countless others whose voices and action have left snail trails across my life. And Rule Number One is: There Is No Dogma Here.

The E(h)nd Game: An Anti-Manifesto

1. There is No Dogma Here

This is not a didactic list of rules to live, work and die by. That would seem somewhat against the spirit of the thing, no? It's an archive, a layering of thoughts and ideas that have stuck, for better or for worse. Erik Ehn reminds us, "Theatre is the metric of society. It needs no metric of its own."

2. The Real World is Messy

There is no easy answer and there are no clean solutions. Nothing here is absolute. Beyond the walls of thought, compromise and dissatisfaction are inevitable.

3. Wait for Your Invitation

Listen for a Long Time.

Wait for the Invitation.

Be Ready For It.

Respond With Process.

Don't Promise What You Can't Deliver. Go.

4. Theatre is Hospitality

Let's not start describing what "Theatre Is...." But we can allow ourselves one definition. Theatre is kindness and "how they are with each other." It is how we share ourselves with more of ourselves. Put the invitation out in the right way and the right people will respond. Theatre is reciprocity, but who reciprocates what to whom is not always clear.

5. Do Less Better

Simplify. Simplify. Simplify. Edit. Take on less work. Put more time into fewer projects and do them better. Don't try to cram in all your ideas. A practitioner should always remove one item of thought before leaving the rehearsal room (cheers, Coco Chanel).

6. Cast Your Own Audience

Some like to ask, "Who is your audience?" I think I want to ask, "Would you like to be my audience?" The performance has to be created with the audience "already in the room," sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally. Theatre is hospitality, so think about how you want to be with your audience from the start. " Tolstoy said that every use of money is a failure of hospitality, so why do you want to charge your audience money to share time with you?

7. What You Don't Do Is As Important As What You Do

Make choices. Choosing not to do is as hard and as important as choosing what to do. Be clear on boundaries. What you are might be better seen in the negative space. Not every space needs to be filled.

8. Be Clear On Who You Are

Your status as an outsider to the group is a gift to that group. Your position defines what they are not; you are a "not-them" that can listen when they explain who "they" are. Your neediness is a gift; it is something to be tended to that can bring people together. Your job is not to be the expert. Your job is to make the space, and hold the space. Admit what draws you to the community: it might be painful, it might be old, it might be curious, it might be vain. But know what quality is in the group that is the thing you need. Theatre is reciprocity.

9. Unsilence: Give Voice

Christina Sauer, a fellow student in the class, said, "Victims of social injustices already possess the power to create change." She's right. We just need to help build the right stage... then get out of the way.

10. All We Insist on is Civility

Anthony Bogues is Director of the Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice at Brown University. He insisted upon nothing more than civility in the room to discuss slavery and race at Brown. What more could we ask for?

11. Know Whether Your Art is Utopian, Secular, or Civic

and...

12. Know Whether Your Art is Traditional, Community, or Professional

Labels are just that. But know where your work sits in the wider context. People will give you labels. Be ready for that to happen, it can help. And know where you're aiming to go before you begin.

13. Make It Fine, Repeatable and Difficult

There is always a pre-existing excellence in the room. This is not the same as virtuosity. Experience the room. Look at the language in the room. Then give it form, and think about polishing it.

14. Making Art is Building Up Layers of Varnish On An Idea

You don't have to make everything at once. Start small, build it up. Leave a trace in everything you do and let the traces accumulate. Use what you have, what you bring, and what you make in the room. The product is the report on the process.

15. *Conflict Doesn't Need To Be Inside The Play*

Orthodoxy says good theatre is built on conflict. But the conflict doesn't need to be in the script or on the stage. It can be inside the people in the room. They bring conflict with them – why else are they there? What else do you need? Another student, Flordelino Lagundino, said, "Drama resides in myself." Sauer also said, "In performing, we are acting to the rhythm of our bodies."

16. *Beginnings Are Sensitive Times*

"A beginning is the time for taking the most delicate care that the balances are correct. This every sister of the Bene Gesserit knows." Thus begins the *Manual of Muad'Dib* by the Princess Irulan, according to Frank Herbert.

17. *Tell Them What They're Going To Do; Do It; Tell Them What They Did*

Once you begin, give the workshop a good form and let people know what to expect in the time you have together: the stuff you really want to do and the stuff you might not have time to do. And the stuff you won't do.

18. *Endings Are Sensitive Times*

When you're finished, finish well. Be tired. Be euphoric. Be ready to leave. Be desperate for more. But come with your best self in that moment, and finish the work with the respect it deserves.

19. *The Form Of Theatre Is The Threshold, Not The Destination*

Theatre should inspire your audience, not impress them. Audience should be the consequence of your process; audience is not there to give glory to your work. The form of the theatre should open up a dialogue, it should not be the dialogue. Community is the consequence of your actions.

20. *No One Ever Made Good Art Alone*

The self-made man is a myth. Theatre is community.

21. *Sometimes You're Not The Right Person*

You can't save everyone. Maybe you can't save anyone. You certainly can't work with everyone. Who you are might not be what is needed. Sometimes you're just not the right person for the place or the time. The politics might be just too much. Or maybe no one is the right person. Art can't do it all and sometimes the only thing left...

...is silence.

"There is no real ending. It's just the place where you stop the story." - Frank Herbert