

UNDER THE RADAR 2011

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

By Ben Cameron

We gather today in paradoxical and confusing times—a time of transparency, access, and openness, and of obfuscation, entrenchment and misinformation: a time of thrilling advances and appalling backsliding. The platform for the future has been hijacked by a Tea Party intent on resurrecting the past. Education faces draconian cuts even as the no billionaire left behind Bush tax cuts are extended. “Activist judges,” “socialized medicine,” and plain old “liberal” have become synonymous with anti-Christian, anti-patriotic and anti-responsible, while in a twist of Orwellian proportion, fear and bigotry have been officially enshrined in network news as “fair and balanced,” thank you Fox News. With every passing day, we watch the inflammatory supplant the informed, the rabid roar above the reasoned—and—in politics at least—posturing, anger and outrage trump nuance, tolerance and moderation at almost every turn. Just this week, roughly 100 new legislators—many dedicated to rolling back prior legislation in health care, gay rights and. according to today’s New York Times, denying citizenship rights to children born in the United States to undocumented immigrants-- were sworn into Congressional seats, redefining the balance of power and giving us a new Speaker of the House, a speaker lest we forget who in November had successfully pressured the Smithsonian to remove David Wojnoarowicz’ *A Fire In My Belly* from its exhibit. Politics has descended to the lowest levels of reality TV -- a blurring appreciated most astutely by one White House hopeful whose primary qualification for the presidency has been completing an entire half term as governor before abandoning elected duty in favor of Twitter, book tours and the audience ranks of Dancing with the Stars.

Indeed we all increasingly live in and through the media: Gen X-ers today spend 20.7 hours of leisure time every week on TV and online combined, on the majority TV; Gen Y-ers spend even more—22.8 hours, the majority on line. Net-geners—who on average send and receive 80 text messages per day or 2400 per month—will by the time of college graduation have spent more than 20,000 hours on the Internet and an additional 10,000 hours playing video

games—a reminder that we now operate in a cultural market in which computer games annually outsell movie and music recordings combined.

And this unprecedented intrusion of technology into every aspect of our lives is remaking us in profound and subtle ways. While each of us through the internet now has access to the widest range of ideas in human history, potential of exposure to divergent points of view and more informed social dialogue are increasingly countermanded by filters that block distasteful perspectives and by the proliferation of websites designed to confirm and substantiate any belief, no matter how paranoid or far-fetched it may be, narrowing rather than expanding the world view of many and contributing enormously to more fractious, fraying and polarized civic discourse.

Enticement to consume is reinforced with every passing moment, exposed as we are to between 3-5,000 different marketing messages every single day, each whetting and stoking our appetite for more. Indeed now, thanks to the internet, we can get anything we want, whenever we want it, customized to our own personal specifications. We can shop at three in the morning or ten o'clock at night, ordering jeans tailor made to our own bodies, delivered to our own doors-- expectations of personalization, convenience and personalization that theatre—theatre which depends on set curtain times, specific geographic venues, attendant inconveniences of parking, travel and the like—simply cannot meet. Moreover, this new technology is remaking our economic system: in an age where young people especially access culture on demand through YouTube and iTunes any time they want it and for little or no apparent cost, what will it mean in the future when we ask a potential audience member to pay \$50, 75, 100 for a theatre ticket, when audiences have grown accustomed to downloading on the internet for .99 a song or for free?

We are essentially in the midst of, if not a revolution, at the very least a profound reformation—political reformation, social reformation, a reformation in human consciousness—and why should we expect the arts to stand above this fray? For the theatre especially—a form dedicated to dialogue, to nuance, to the communal, to the live--, what will these trends towards diatribe, the sound bite, the isolated and the virtual mean? Surely we recognize ourselves in the words of Adrienne Rich when she writes, “We’re out in a country that has no language, no laws. Whatever we do is pure invention. The maps they gave us were out of date by years...”

And aren't you glad Mark invited me here to brighten your day?

As we contemplate the future, history may well hold the key to how we might think—a notion planted for me at the 2009 ISPA Conference in New York, when someone asked, “What if we are experiencing the Arts Reformation equivalent of the Religious Reformation of the 15th Century?”

That image has been a rich one for me to consider. The religious reformation was spurred in large part by technological breakthrough—indeed, the invention of the printing press and the subsequent wide spread public access to both scripture and to religious tracts made both the motive and the global reach of the Reformation possible—and the current Art Reformation is being dramatically shaped by new technologies and a massive redistribution of knowledge.

The religious reformation decimated old business structures. As National Arts Strategies CEO Russell Willis Taylor has waggishly observed, “The reformation was a great time to be a land buyer and an awful time to be a monastery”—certainly a resonant image as we see a growing number of orchestras and theatres and dance companies around the country shuttering their doors forever.

But perhaps most significantly, the religious reformations essentially challenged the notions of who was entitled to practice and of the necessity of intermediation in a spiritual relationship.

Chris Anderson, editor of *Wired* magazine and author of a book entitled *The Long Tail*, for example, sees in technology the unleashing of a veritable tsunami of creative energy. With the invention and now affordability of cell phones, mini cams, computer software and more, he notes, the means of artistic production have been democratized for the first time in human history. In the 1930's, people who wished to make a movie had to work for Warner

Brothers or RKO, for who could afford cameras, lighting equipment, editing equipment and more? Now who among us does not know a 14 year old hard at work on her second, third or fourth film?

Furthermore, the means of artistic distribution have been democratized. Again, in the 30's, the major studios played that role; now upload your film onto YouTube or Facebook, and you have instant world-wide distribution without leaving the privacy of your own bedroom.

This double impact is occasioning a massive redefinition of authorship and the cultural market. Today everyone is a potential author—and while the market for traditional arts audiences may be eroding, the market for arts participants—those citizens who dance or write poetry, who paint or sing, who make their own films is exploding as indeed the arts market paradigm shifts from consumption to broader participation in which attendance is only one option. We are witnessing an exponential growth in the number of amateurs doing work at a professional level—a group dubbed elsewhere as the Pro-Ams—a group whose work populates YouTube, Film festivals, dance competitions and more, a group who are expanding our aesthetic vocabulary, even as they assault our traditional notions of cultural authority and undermine the assumed ability of traditional arts organizations to set the cultural agenda.

Now if you think you hear me crying for the death of institutions and the charging of the metaphoric institutional Bastilles, let me be clear: I believe that the traditional arts and the best of our current arts institutions will continue to be vitally important. Just as the Religious Reformation did not obliterate the Catholic Church—a church which 600 years later provides deep meaning to millions worldwide--the best of our current institutions will continue to be worthy of our investment as they too continue to offer deeply rewarding spiritual experiences to audiences who hunger for them. Moreover, our institutions still represent the best opportunities for lives of economic dignity for many artists, and the logical place where artists who need and deserve to work at a certain scale can find an appropriate home. We need to train artists who can command their spaces and administrators capable of leading them. Many of you may will, I predict, move into those institutions to lead them in thrilling new directions, just as former theatre renegades like Perseverance Theatre founder

Molly Smith, Cornerstone Theatre founder Bill Rauch, and early Eureka Theatre leaders Tony Taccone and Oskar Eustis who now lead respectively Arena Stage, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Berkeley Rep and The Public Theatre where we sit today, have already done.

But the Reformation reduced the monopoly on practice that the Catholic church had held and both reconceived and broadened the universe of how religion could operate, when and where it could operate, who could be empowered to act, giving rise to new denominations, new rituals, new opportunities both for clergy to practice in radically new ways and for the common lay person to assume responsibility for her own spiritual experience, just as the Pro-Ams are doing in the arts even now. The most salient development of the last decade has been the dismantling of rigid hierarchies of amateur vs professional, audience vs practitioner, in favor of a spectrum offering an array of artistic choices—one in which the hybrid artist is emerging in greater and greater numbers—the arts professional who chooses to work outside of the traditionally hermetic arts environment, not from financial necessity but because the work she or he feels called to do cannot be accomplished in the narrow confines of the gallery, the concert hall or the theatre at the other.

Today's theatre world is defined, yes by great institutions like the Steppenwolf of Chicago, Arena Stage of Washington DC or New York's Public Theatre and by the superb artists, dedicated to preserving the great works of the past or to expanding the historic forms of expression and aesthetic who populate them, but equally defined by a dense network of small ensembles whose objectives can be equally diverse—groups like Elevator Repair Service's attempts to find a new vocabulary to explore great works of the past, groups like Philadelphia's New Paradise Laboratory, committed to creating new works in new aesthetics, and groups dedicated to community building and social action—groups like the Living Word Project at Youth Speaks, with its increasing investment in environmental action, led by the phenomenal Mark Bamuthi Joseph-- or Universes, who upend every traditional notion of how theatre can and should work in favor of new logic based on how heart listens and works in lifting every voice, with no sharper listener than Steven Sapp and no voice greater or louder or sweeter to my ear and heart, at least, than that of the great Mildred Ruiz,.

As Consultant Alan Brown in a recent evaluation of our Creative Campus wrote, if the arts are to be relevant and gain an audience, “a new breed of artist will need to be cultivated. These artists will be open to critical feedback, vulnerable to new collaboration and new ways of thinking, willing to work with diverse constituents, and comfortable discussing their creative processes in a laboratory environment.”

You are precisely those artists of the future. Just as today’s major institutional theatres were for the most part begun by people in their 20’s and 30’s who forged paths and roads where none had existed before —people like Gordon Davidson at the Mark Taper Forum or Robert Brustein at Yale Rep or Zelda Fichandler who started the Arena Stage as a for-profit theatre fresh out of graduate school, or Tyrone Guthrie or John Jory or Ruth Malczek or Elizabeth LeCompte or Lou Bellamy and so so many others who within my own lifetime began theatres we now take for granted as institutions—our arts landscape is at a comparable moment of evolution now—a moment in which a new generation of pioneers—many of whom sit in this room today—are responsible for creating new paths and new ways of behavior, where few or none exist today.

Everywhere I see indications of our increasing readiness to seize this moment, not as one of crisis, but of opportunity.

Everywhere I go, I see organizations reexamining themselves, asking hard questions about their missions, their values, inviting the complexities that arise when purpose shifts from producing great plays to connecting audiences to great plays—a profound shift undertaken by Horizon Theatre in Atlanta, for example.

Everywhere I go, I see organizations reinventing—changing programming and practice, changing organizational structures, changing organizational cultures to embrace more lateral thinking, more active participation by increasingly diverse groups of individuals pledged to common cause. Former emphases on fixed assets and traditional stability are yielding to notions of flexibility, nimbleness and resilience—the radical reinvention afoot at the American

Repertory Theatre in Cambridge MA, for example, or the reinvention of the artist-audience interaction at HERE with artists like Taylor Mac—a reflection of emerging impulses to live a vision of the arts that are firmly rooted in the world, rather than insulated from that world; to speak with the world in dialogue, rather than at the world; to mirror the same principles of nimbleness and openness, of innovation and curiosity in behavior that they seek to impart in their aesthetics.

Everywhere I go, I see artists and organizations recommitting—a recommitment that begins with reconnection to purpose and clarity about the impact we wish the work to have. MIT, arguably the nation's foremost institution dedicated to innovation—sees their mission as “useful knowledge for solving problems,” and assess impact through the double lens of innovation and relevance. If art is a way of knowing, as many of us believe it is, what is the useful knowledge we have, and what is the problem we are trying to solve? Can we assess our impact by innovation and relevance as well?

I know that your lives can be dispiriting—facing enormous budget cuts, trying to find an audience amid a sea of white noise, struggling to stay alive. But I deeply believe that this tri-partite moment of reexamination, reinvention and recommitment are the paths we must walk—collectively and individually. As someone nearing the end of his 50's, I am perhaps overly sensitive to a survey of retirees who, when asked what they most regretted about their lives, offered three answers: 1) They regret not being clearer about the purpose of their lives. 2) They regret not spending more time in reflective thinking. 3) They regret they did not risk more. Regardless of our age, we cannot lead individual lives or organizations we will live to regret.

While the arts are at times dismissed as unimportant in the larger context of a world beset with problems—of climate change, of gross disparity in the distribution of wealth, of terrorism and hunger, international warfare and AIDS and more—we must be increasingly global in our vision and in our embrace and assert the role the arts can play in solving these challenges. Especially as we strive to maximize the thrilling promise of an increasingly diverse world, the arts will be increasingly critical as we move to a democratic pluralistic society. As Francois Materasso observes, the arts enable people with non-majority

values, ideas or lifestyles to represent themselves to the majority, to become subjects of their own characterization rather than the object of characterizations by others—a power of authenticity and voice for suffering and difference that explains the attempts by authoritarian regimes to squelch and silence the arts, as our colleagues from Bellarus and Hungary especially know all too well.

How has our understanding of the injustices of the criminal system been expanded by *The Exonerated*, the play about prisoners on death row performed across the country and at state capitols; of Iraqi war refugees reshaped by *Aftermath*, currently touring the nation, or of the experience of women through *The Vagina Monologues*? How did the film *Philadelphia* and productions of *The Normal Heart* and *The Laramie Project* and yes even *Will and Grace* humanize the HIV positive and gay community for an indifferent nation?

Ever since Charles Dickens novels produced changes to child labor law, and *Uncle Tom's Cabin* galvanized the abolition movement, the arts have been critical to social change. Those of us who remember the Vietnam war protests—protests that always began with singing *Blowing in the Wind*—or the civil rights movement—where we always sang *We Shall Overcome*—cannot be surprised by the power of the arts to form instant community poised to move together. Arts can be a massive force for social change.

In an internet drive world where every voice can have a platform and where public discourse is characterized by an ever increasing din of disinformation, nurturing the ability of people to listen deeply in public space through theatre is social activism.

In a time of race baiting and onerous immigration laws, of mounting hate crimes and appalling rise in teen suicides, especially among young gay men and lesbians, instilling respect for those with different heritages or beliefs or lives is social activism.

In a time of a fraying social fabric and mounting factionalism, assembling the widest possible range of people to find common joy and celebration through

humor or song, through tragedy or tears, is social activism.

To work in the theatre is to have a platform--however many or however few come to bear witness to your work-- to have a platform. But it is not a platform to be taken for granted any longer. In a world of polarization, of increased competition, of fear, we must seize it, we must own it, we must earn it. We must be able to articulate the value of the professional artist within the spectrum of creative activity. We must replace our frequently trumpeted right to fail with an imperative to succeed even while acknowledging we will not always get there—but failure for its own sake without learning, without understanding, without subsequent growth and change is no longer defensible. We must rise to the challenges of transparency and accountability that the internet age brings us all. We are the theatre—and in an age of demonization and fear of difference, of intolerant social policies and politicians who encourage us to view our fellow human beings with fear and hostility and suspicion, we must seize our role in the formation of our national characters, remembering that whatever else we do, we all gather audiences to look at our fellow human beings with curiosity and generosity. God knows, if we have ever needed this ability in human history, we need it now.

I salute each of you today, not only as artists but as social activists—regardless of your aesthetic objectives-- pledged as you are to a world of tolerance, of compassion, of empathy, of hope.

I promise you the hand of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation is outstretched to you both now and for years to come.

And I thank you for your kindness and patience in listening to me this morning. Thank you and God speed.