

# Art and Accountability

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“When I feel trapped, I ask myself, what would an artist do?”

Antanas Mockus

Pedro Reyes had an ambitious idea for an art show and then he despaired. The idea was to fill Harvard University’s Carpenter Center galleries during the spring of 2006 with projections of the future.<sup>1</sup> But, on second thought, the project conjured such bleak visions of violence, scarcity, disease, and death that the distinguished young Mexican multi-media artist felt stuck between wanting to be honest and not wanting to spread gloom. Then something happened to revive his faith in art along with his hope in the future. Reyes discovered two cultural agents, “connectionists” to use his neologism, who show how to link creative practices to social and democratic development.

The first and most spectacular agent today is Antanas Mockus, a mayor who thinks like an artist. The second is Augusto Boal, an artist who acts in city government. Discovering them was an invitation to think otherwise about things to come and about one’s own contribution to forging the future. It was also a burden of responsibility to be ingenious and accountable. So Reyes got back on an active track where he recognized

1. See, for example, <http://www.culturebase.net/artist.php?229>. He discovered Mockus and Boal through the Cultural Agents initiative at Harvard University. See <http://culturalagents.org/>

more fellow travelers among the artists he most admires: Alejandro Jodorowsky, for example, whose range of creative interventions (poetry, psycho magic, film, and plastic arts) may well serve as the third inspiration for the cultural agency of Reyes's future show. "Latin America may be politically unstable and poor by economic measures," he concluded, "but it is incredibly rich in creativity." That richness can pay off in public gains. It's not that creative arts lack intrinsic value, but that this very autonomy triggers fresh perceptions and unclogs procedure in ways that make it a social resource to reckon with.<sup>2</sup>

Exemplary creative agents can spark recognition of agency in others who artfully engage the world, as Reyes demonstrated by spotting Jodorowsky in the company of Mockus and Boal. The point is worth making in order to connect the intrinsic value of art to the added value of humanist commentary and interpretation which are now increasingly discounted by funders and policy makers. Like writers, composers, painters, and playwrights, humanists who interpret and teach about art can also raise expectations that creativity may contribute to democratic social change. So much depends on the delicacy and skill of interpretation which often determines the pleasure and after-effects of others. "There is nothing either good or bad," says the artist Shakespeare, "but thinking makes it so" (*Hamlet*, II:2).

Teachers are agents of culture who multiply the lessons they learn by reaching masses of students, whatever the reigning taste in art may be. To make good on this broad-based power of persuasion, humanists may want to add a reflexive question to research agendas and to lesson plans: how does our interpretive or pedagogical work affect the world? On this count, ironically, the humanities lag a bit behind the social sciences after inspiring them to develop levels of analysis beyond supposedly objective or positivist reporting. Humanists seldom investigate the social effects of interpretation. The silence is curious, because humanists obviously do something to the social environment by affecting the values and hopes of students and general readers, whether we feature work that builds society or art that undoes it. In fact, all of us are cultural agents: those who make, comment, buy, sell, reflect, allocate, decorate, vote, don't vote, or otherwise lead social, culturally constructed, lives. The appropriate question about agency is not if we exercise it, but how self-consciously we do so; that is, to what end and what effect.

Agent is a term that acknowledges the small shifts in perspective and practice that can turn artists and teachers into first movers toward collective change.<sup>3</sup> The option of agency released Reyes from the familiar double bind of expecting too much from art and too little: on the one hand, artists and critics can make the radical and impractical demand that art replace a bad social system for a better one; on the other, they may stop short of expecting any change and stay stuck in denunciation, irony, cynicism, melancholy. Between frustrated ambition and helplessness,

2. See *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts* by Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks (Rand Corporation: 2005).

3. See Douglas North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990); also his "A Transaction Cost Theory of Politics," *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1990, 2 (4): 355–367.

agency is a modest but relentless call to creative action, one minute step at a time.<sup>4</sup> It enables artists like Pedro Reyes and his models to engage the existing social world, instead of either discarding it or despairing altogether.<sup>5</sup>

## Two Models and More

Antanas Mockus, the magus of Bogotá, is an international beacon of creative administration. Philosopher and mathematician, twice elected mayor and now presidential candidate in Colombia, he knows and teaches the value of artful responses to crime, corruption, and violence. During more than a decade before Mockus assumed office in 1995, general chaos had kept the capital off limits for tourists and had tormented residents. The situation seemed hopeless, given the level of corruption that turns investment against itself. More money for economic recovery deepens the pockets of drug dealers, and more armed police escalate the number of guns and the level of violence. What intervention could possibly make sense in this stagnant but volatile situation? I have asked this question of economists and political scientists who admit they are stumped by the challenge. But Mockus took action by engaging culture to connect the body and soul of the city.<sup>6</sup> If the body politic had grown too weak to process fiscal cures or to expect security, the first treatment was to revive a democratizing desire for civility through art, antics, and accountability.

For example, the municipality's inspired staff hired twenty pantomime artists to replace the corrupt traffic police. Each artist trained another twenty amateurs and soon the urban space became a stage for daily merriment based on rules of red lights and cross-walks. Spectacle created a public, a res-pública to enjoy and to reflect on the law after citizens had been avoiding one another during years of lawlessness, mutual suspicion, and fear. The mayor's team also printed thousands of laminated cards with a green thumb-up on one side and red thumb-down on the other, for citizens to signal approval or disapproval of traffic behavior and help to self-regulate a shared public sphere. Engaged citizens don't simply follow laws; they also participate in constructing and adjusting law to changing conditions. Vaccination against violence was one city-wide performance-therapy against the "epidemic" that had become a cliché for rampant aggression. Another playful interruption of murderous routine was "Women's Night Out." Unlike the direct demands for women's rights in the Anglo-American movement "Take Back the Night," Bogotá's politics were indirect and playful, encouraging sociability among women who took to the streets, the bars, and dance clubs while the men stayed home. The next day, newspapers reported no homicides the night before. Respect for life and for the law evidently did not sacrifice fun for women. In fact, Mockus taught us at Harvard University that without pleasure, pragma-

4. "Wiggle Room" is the title of my introductory essay in *Cultural Agency in the Americas*, a collection of essays forthcoming from Duke University Press.
5. Conversation with Pedro Reyes, June 8, 2005.
6. The celebrated mayor Edi Rama of Tirana, Albania, performed a similar feat by literally painting the town. See *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2005. Jane Kramer, "Painting the Town" p 50. "You hear him everywhere: a gravelly basso exhorting the lazy, seducing the skeptics, booming his way through a hip-hop track about Tirana that half the city seems to own. He is inexhaustible. He spends his days repairing the body and soul of a shattered capital and his nights prowling its streets, seeing that the work got done, and that no one has been stealing street lights or dropping beer bottles or cigarette wrappers—that people are behaving like citizens. Rama is a Balkan original, and maybe the most original thing about him is that he isn't really a politician. He is an artist who, you might say, took Tirana for his canvas."

tism shrivels into a poor support for politics.<sup>7</sup> Arts programs in schools, rock concerts in parks, a “ciclovía” on Sundays and holidays that closes streets to traffic and opens them to bikers and walkers have, together with tough law enforcement and fiscal transparency, helped to revive the once desperate metropolis.

The documented results of the program called “cultura ciudadana” show that despair is unrealistic, a failure of determination and creativity. The dramatic reduction of homicides, alongside an equally striking increase in tax revenues, register successes that outstripped everyone’s expectations, including the mayor himself and his advisors. When admirers from other cities wonder if the particular programs of cultural citizenship could possibly work on their home bases where people behave differently, Mockus recommends inventing games that will work better and learning to think counterfactually. Without imagining the world otherwise, change is unthinkable. And thinking otherwise is an invitation to play.

Augusto Boal has been playing all his life. Founder of “Theater of the Oppressed” as a companion to Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed,” Boal developed interactive theater, first in Brazil and then throughout the world.<sup>8</sup> As a young actor, Boal learned that theater runs ethical and aesthetic risks by replacing the real-life subjects of a play with a script written by someone else and then acted by others. When he played a hired farm hand in a rustic production that called on peasants to take up arms against the landowners, the show got an enthusiastic response from its target audience. But when the peasants offered spare arms to the actors who had sworn liberty or death, the artists demurred, explaining that their work was not to make war but to incite it. The difference between responsible action and reckless representation triggered Boal’s reflection on the relationship between art and accountability.

The reflection haunted him during Brazil’s military dictatorship while Boal worked in Peru. There he wrote and directed a play based on the problem of a local woman whose deceitful husband would return the next day. Furious at the man, but afraid to be abandoned and more vulnerable, the woman faced a dilemma that the play would try to resolve. At the performance another, physically imposing, woman interrupted from the audience: “You have to be very clear with that man,” she bellowed. Each timid adjustment that Boal offered in the script confirmed her scorn for the playwright, until she concluded that he was hopeless, turned her back on the theater, and lumbered toward the door. Exasperated, Boal stopped the woman and urged her to get on the stage and act out what she meant by “being very clear.” The smart blow she dealt to the unfortunate actor who played the husband broke the already tired back of traditional theater for Boal.

From that dramatic moment, he has been promoting “Forum Theater” which invites the public to watch with an eye toward intervening at a

7. “Hedonism and Pragmatism,” a course by Antanas Mockus at Harvard University, Fall 2004.

8. [http://www.tonisant.com/aitg/Boal\\_Techniques/](http://www.tonisant.com/aitg/Boal_Techniques/)  
Thanks to Diana Taylor for pointing out Boal’s debt to Jacobo Moreno, disciple of Sigmund Freud, who initiated psychodrama as a therapy technique.

play's crisis points. The one-act tragedies that portray apparently intractable dilemmas (poverty, disease, violence, homelessness) are no longer composed by a playwright but by groups of local subjects, facilitated by a Boal trainee inside *favelas*, marginal schools, and prisons. After the tragedy ends, a second act begins when the facilitator joins the actors on stage and invites volunteers from the audience to identify, replay, and change a particular scene that determined the tragedy but that could have been played otherwise. Through facilitators Boal multiplies the effect of his art. He no longer trains actors, but teaches enabling agents to assist groups of potential artists to act out, and change, scenes based on their own lives. After several people from the public intervene to adjust the script, participants on and off stage can sense a double dose of magic: insoluble problems have morphed into artistic challenges that spur competition for creativity; and participants acknowledge new admiration for creative neighbors who can avert tragedy.

When facilitators add a third act, to distribute pieces of paper and pencils for the public to jot down possible laws that would respond to the problems represented on stage, the activity is called "Legislative Theater."<sup>9</sup> Unbelievably, for some skeptics, Augusto Boal was elected councilman for the city of Rio de Janeiro, twice, thanks to the multiplied effects of his interactive theater and also to his public spectacles in defense of democracy [including a funeral procession for that beloved but dead political option]. While he served on the City Council, Boal sponsored legislation collected from audiences and actors in marginal neighborhoods. Thirteen of those laws have passed, and several were adopted at the national level.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the Americas, creative culture is a vehicle for agency. In the United States, as in Brazil, theater improvisations foster collaboration and find dramatic outlets for frustrations that might otherwise fester or explode into violence. Without the "Teatro campesino," reports a labor organizer for César Chávez, there would be no United Farm Workers' Union. On the flat backs of pick-up trucks parked just beyond the limit of a landholder's property, loudspeakers would call campesinos to come watch and join the plays that poked fun at bosses and celebrated workers' solidarity.<sup>11</sup> To mention just one more art of multiplication, photographers are teaching visual literacy and linking the mastery of this skill to related arts and sciences. Photography students learn to read and write in order to add titles and commentary to their pictures; they explore variations through lighting, perspective, composition, adding or subtracting elements. Sometimes coloring in a neighborhood scene, planting a tree or fixing a roof, produces a counterfactual image of imaginable improvement. Nancy McGirr began with a few children living in the city dump of Guatemala City, and now counts one of them as a colleague with a college degree.<sup>12</sup> João Kulcsar trains art students as facilitators who teach photography in the *favelas* of São Paulo.<sup>13</sup> Martín Rosenthal develops

9. Augusto Boal, *Legislative Theater* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

10. Interview with Augusto Boal, Harvard University, December 7, 2003.

11. Marshall Ganz, Presentation in Graduate Student Cultural Agents workshop, November 2003.

12. See <http://www.fotokids.org>.

13. <http://www.aver.org.br/averes/fotocidadaniaprojeto.htm>

artists and entrepreneurs from undervalued teenagers, marginalized in a slum literally called Ciudad Oculta outside of Buenos Aires.<sup>14</sup> Surely readers will think of other cultural agents once they expect to find many more among active citizens.

### Humanities in Action: Show and Tell

For example, we humanists can recognize socially responsive agency through at least two standard professional approaches to the arts: we highlight particular creative practices; and we give those practices a theoretical spin.

The first value added by humanists follows from simply noting and commenting on examples of arts that build society. Drawing attention to undervalued creative practices offers them as models to inspire variations and choices for research projects. Young humanists are already discovering agency beyond existing cultural studies.<sup>15</sup> Research begins by locating or formulating a topic; we choose which text, phenomenon, or practice, which perspective or approach, merits extended consideration in a scholarly essay. Allow me to mention my own choice as a case in point. Instead of focusing on popular cultural studies topics such as violence, necrophilia, consumerism, or human rights abuse, I chose to focus a new book and course on “Bilingual Aesthetics.”<sup>16</sup>

The invented topic names a common feature of written and performing arts that is under-represented in scholarship organized by single language traditions. Bilingual games cross country limits; they evince histories of migration, complicated belonging, and flexible identity, as well as aesthetic (and cognitive, political, philosophical) advantages. My preference for emphasizing these creative compensations for the difficulty of living in two or more languages is meant to renew appreciation for literary specificity in the face of cultural nationalism. It also promotes a new sentimental education that takes seriously the formalist defense of strangeness as art’s signature effect. We can learn to enjoy strangeness in both immigrants and native citizens, and thereby to counteract the damaging stigma of speaking home languages in intolerant host countries. The project acknowledges the pleasures and self-respect that code-switchers earn by dint of their virtuosity, despite sometimes making embarrassing mistakes. Mistakes can brighten speech with a *sun-risa*<sup>17</sup> or give the pleasure of a found poem. Always, they mark communication with a cut or a tear that comes close to producing an aesthetic effect. The risk and thrill of speaking or writing anything can sting, every time language fails us. Knowing how language can fail makes success feel like a small miracle. In other words, bilingual aesthetics casts the precarious subjects as self-authorizing and original agents, even in the face of monolingual nativists.<sup>18</sup>

14. <http://www.arteamundo.com/ph15/>

15. The first Graduate Student Conference on Cultural Agents attracted a great number of proposals, and the excellent papers presented form the core of a forthcoming collection with The Other Press.

16. Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics: A New Sentimental Education* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004)

17. Víctor Hernández Cruz, “You Gotta Have Your Tips on Fire,” *Mainland; poems* (New York: Random House, 1973) 3–4.

18. Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

The course on “Bilingual Arts” is heavy on theory, partly to demonstrate that theory is practically second nature to bilinguals who normally abstract expression from meaning, and partly to display a range of refinements that follow from the “open sesame” of bilingual re-readings of literary classics from Hemingway and William Carlos Williams, to Kafka and Nabokov. Companion assignments in theory (aesthetics, liberalism, nationalism, language philosophy, deconstruction, formalism, and feminism) underline the advantages of thinking outside of the monolingual box. The course, like the book, is about added value, not about remediation. And the addition sets off a chain of enhancements when students engage in the “service learning” component of the course. They teach and translate in local schools, immigration centers, and law offices, where they also learn about the everyday arts of code-switching with a new appreciation.<sup>19</sup>

19. José Luis Falconi, administrator for the course, is also the associate director of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard University.

20. Friedrich Schiller’s program for modern citizenship is *The Aesthetic Education of Man* (1759) eds. Wilkinson and Willoughby. He wrote the *Letters* to open dead-ends in politics through art that wrests freedom from contradiction. Sentimental, tormented art like Schiller’s, unlike Goethe’s naïve genius, can be taught; it thrives in the very distance from nature where poets have freedom to maneuver. Freedom’s dependence on self-consciousness, and the promise of a new spontaneity based on reflection, became the themes of Schiller’s pedagogy. It turned Kant’s lessons about the differences between beauty and the sublime, love and respect, nature and artistic genius, into a progression of before and after aesthetic education. See especially “Ninth Letter,” points 1, 2, and 3, p. 55.

Cultural agency is an invitation to notice “felicitous” engagements as well as frustrating performances. And since the approach privileges the surprise of ingenious responses to difficult challenges, it can sustain the attention of humanists trained to value art for producing uncommon effects. Alongside the end-game of critique, humanist agents can play the gambit of reflecting on an inexhaustible range of creative moves and on their immediate or delayed effects. The objective for cultural agents is not a partisan victory but the development of “thick” political subjects who participate in democratic life. Democracy depends on sturdy and resourceful citizens able to engage more than one point of view and to wrest rights and resources from limited assets. In other words, non-authoritarian government counts on creativity to loosen conventional thought and free up the space where conflicts are negotiated, before they reach a brink of either despair or aggression. Aesthetic education, Friedrich Schiller insisted at the beginning of the republican age, is a necessary part of civic development.<sup>20</sup> The sometimes delayed social effects of an aesthetic education can rush skeptics to conclude that one thing has little to do with another. But hasty conclusions misprise the gradual process of subject formation. In the end, results will be important, as talented administrators like Mockus maintain. He developed innovative, often indirect, measures for changing attitudes of youth and mature citizens, before and after experimenting with particular cultural programs. Among his fans, artists and teachers may be cured of an allergy to numbers.

### Self-Authorization

The second contribution that humanists can make to other agents is to distill general observations from a variety of particular events or effects. Theory helps to extract usable lessons for replicating best practices. And theory for humanists today necessarily includes reflections on perfor-

21. See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Also her *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's Dirty War*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); and *Theatre of Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991).
22. Jon Elster, *Ulysses Unbound: Studies in Rationality, Precommitment*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 200) Chapter 3. I am grateful to Antanas Mockus for this reference and for so many lessons.
23. Thanks to Antanas Mockus for this point and the following reference: Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, Samuel Bowles, Herbert Gintis, Ernst Fehr, Colin Camerer, editors. *Foundations of Human Sociality: Economic Experiments and Ethnographic Evidence from Fifteen Small-scale Societies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
24. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, with an introduction by Margaret Canovan, (University of Chicago Press, 1998, orig. 1958) p.182. She defends "speech, in which someone talks to somebody about something that is of interest to both because it *inter-est*, it is between them."

mance that venture beyond the archives and museums of tangible art into the world of intangible ritual and spectacle as they shape our social lives.<sup>21</sup> A theoretical turn, for example, on the admirable programs in visual literacy might note that the particular medium is photography, but the general message is that art nurtures a knack for decision making. The process of selection and composition is common to other arts, including literature, music, drama, and painting. Choosing a long shot, a close-up, a profile, or a reflection, a particular adjective or verb in one language or another, harmony or dissonance, a monologue or a chorus, artists know that the material will not determine the product, but that art depends on informed decisions based on skills that can be learned and creativity that can be nurtured.

Making art, therefore, amounts to a kind of creative control over available material. The first ripple effect is a self-authorizing, enabling, sense of engagement with existing material. A second ripple effect of this hands-on training with always limited resources is the recognition that constraint is a condition of creativity, not a nemesis. Think of a good sonnet inside the prison house of predetermined numbers and order of lines, syllables, and rhymes; or consider the deaf and mute condition of fine silent films, or a jazz riff that stays tethered to one melody. Creative subjects respond to limitation with self-limitation, paradoxically, to enhance aesthetic effects. By a similar and probably related paradox, rational choices in economics and politics limit options in order to promote maximum returns on investments of money and effort.<sup>22</sup> Artists and truly rational citizens know that their own competing values and desires as well as changing conditions make choices subject to change. Related experiments in behavioral economics show an encouraging, even surprising, level of reciprocity and confidence between strangers.<sup>23</sup> Self-interest apparently need not cancel social and moral norms; in fact, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, *inter-est* depends on others and on training to imagine their perspectives.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, a third ripple effect of aesthetic education — in the spirit of Schiller's program for modern civility — may well be a generally enhanced faculty for active and democratic citizenship. Training in art and interpretation explores contingencies in ways that do, outdo and undo human designs. Thanks to this training, citizens can become both self-authorizing and disposed to engage creatively with a variety of perspectives and projects.

## Interruption

A different theoretical spin might follow from the pantomime artists who stopped traffic jams in Bogotá. One could note that they have been copied in Lima, Peru, and have also inspired municipal posters in London's underground, urging passengers to go to the end of the cars. But the mimes may not work in other cities. Does that make them useless there?

25. Theodore Adorno retains Kant's insistence on the formal autonomy of art. But he adds [through Hegel and Marx] that art is embedded in society. The illusion of autonomy helps art achieve its social character. See Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p. 8.

26. Douglas Kellner's useful review of "Cultural Studies and Ethics." <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/kellner.html> "Although members of the school of British cultural studies including Stuart Hall usually omit the Frankfurt school from his narrative, some of the work done by the Birmingham group replicated certain classical positions of the Frankfurt school, in their social theory and methodological models for doing cultural studies, as well as in their political perspectives and strategies."

27. This is a recurring worry for Walter Benjamin. See his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," especially numbers 2 and 9 in *Illuminations*, edited by Hanna Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969) 253–264. In the same volume, see also the Epilogue of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." "All efforts to render politics aesthetic leads to one

No, not if one extracts the general observation that what makes the mimes work is their interruption of bad habit. Surprise and sudden strangeness of familiar surroundings broke the spell of indifference to rules and refreshed the public's perception of mutual dependence or vulnerability on the streets. The artistic challenge for other cities would be to create other effective interruptions that combine pleasure with a renewed appreciation for public life.

Artful interruptions can unblock procedures mired in habitual abuses or indifference in order to get those practices back on track. Theodore Adorno explored this function of art when he dismissed art's ultimate autonomy as illusory, but nevertheless valued the magic show for the margin of freedom to offer critique that art makes available.<sup>25</sup> Less supple treatments of the relationship between art and politics suggest a substitution of one term by the other: either art is a kind of politics and politics a kind of art, or the confusion seems hopelessly misguided. For cultural studies, the overlap acknowledges a mutual dependence of art and politics.<sup>26</sup> But traditional humanism wants art to steer clear of politics, just as conventional social science defends serious research against claims that culture matters much in public life. Cultural agents might take Adorno's lead and reflect on a different relationship between art and politics, beyond both the catachresis of mutually canceling substitutions and the exclusive maps that isolate art criticism from scientific inquiry.

Art can enable politics by interrupting deadlocks, intersecting debates to get past an impasse of breakdown and facilitate a return to procedure. Art need not replace politics, as Walter Benjamin worried it would when Nazis managed to drown deliberation in a rush of enthusiasm.<sup>27</sup> Nor must politics replace art, in mutual metaphors that disappear the difference between thinking and feeling. Instead, art and regulation can name distinct approaches to culture that run interference one with the other to keep both in line. Art can disrupt in order to refresh rather than to overwhelm politics. This interruption in order to reframe or reform procedure is the fundamental contribution of cultural agency in the sense I am defending, as opposed to tendentious uses of art in the service of ideology or of non-deliberative politics associated with fascism and Stalinism. To pursue an example from Bogotá, the mimes cut in on the corrupt practice of the traffic police; but when habituation left the public cold, a newly trained police force returned to a city that the mimes had helped to reform. Habit kills art, Viktor Shklovsky might have told Mockus; it kills everything.

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thing: war . . . Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian Gods, now is one for itself. Its self-

alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the

situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art." 241–242.

The fundamental aesthetic effect of art is to break habit by “defamiliarization,” the Russian formalist’s name for the surprise that follows from artistic technique. Defamiliarization lifts the pall of unproductive repetition, including the procedure and political arguments that get jammed by corruption or tendentiousness. This makes renewed deliberation a possible after-effect of art. The formalists did not pursue after-effects, but cultural agency can suggest some leads. The mimes and participants in other civic games produced the immediately refreshing effect of estrangement. But by the time their performances failed as art, they had succeeded in effecting a secondary delayed result; a renewed respect for law that brought Bogotá a step closer to coordinating law with culture and morality.<sup>28</sup>

### Unclog the Humanities

Policy makers, foundations, social scientists, and other fellow citizens train a polite gaze on the humanities while continually waning support for students and teachers of the arts alarms and offends us. Don’t we deserve support, almost by birthright, as guardians of artistic and spiritual values in a world that keeps contracting the focus of education to narrowly rational and technical training? Yet training in arts interpretation, as much as in the cultural studies that address a broad range of creative practices, feels the pinch of purse strings drawing closed. Let us consider the predicament and possible responses. Critique of ungenerous others is not enough, and despair amounts to self-defeating inaction. Surely humanists can muster more creativity.

### Common Sense

28. Antanas Mockus, “Anfibios culturales y divorcio entre ley, moral y cultura.” *Revista análisis político* no. 21 (Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1994).

29. Emanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1951). See also *Essays in Kant’s Aesthetics*, edited by Ted Cohen & Paul Guyer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

Quite early in the development of modern civility, intellectual narrowness had worried Emanuel Kant. He hoped to contain “the scandal of reason” that dismissed other human faculties by capping his major work with exercises to develop judgment.<sup>29</sup> Reason would reduce judgment to mere calculation, so Kant located that faculty for thinking freely in the unreasonable evaluation of beauty and the sublime. Aesthetic experience is a second-order pleasure. It judges immediate pleasures in order to distinguish self-serving enjoyment of an object that may be physically or morally useful from the freely conferred admiration for the form of an object, regardless of use or meaning. The exercise of judgment requires practice in locating aesthetic pleasure beyond external purpose and existing concepts. Unlike other philosophical activities, aesthetic judgment for Kant assumes that all evaluators will reach the same conclusion, since their exercises should be equally free from interest. Positing inter-subjective agreement, Kant resignified “common sense” as the sense of

30. Hanna Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, edited with an interpretive essay by Ronald Beiner. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) Before Arendt, Adorno had suggested the ethico-political dimension of Kant's Third Critique. See his *Aesthetic Theory*. Op.cit.
31. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: and how it's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (Basic Books, June 15, 2002). See also, Rob Austin and Lee Devin, *Artful Making: What Managers Need to Learn from Artists* (Financial Times/ Prentice Hall, 2003)
32. Richard J. Deasy (ed.), *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic and Social Development*. (Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers, 2000). See review by Nick Rabkin, in *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, vol. 3, October, 2002. "Caterall catalogs them and argues that each discipline is connected to significant outcomes. For example, in the visual arts, there are findings about how drawing supports writing skills, and how visualization training supports interpretation of text. In music, researchers found strong connections to spatial reasoning and math, and between instrument

judgment derived from freedom that we have in common and that can develop into an aptitude for free citizenship. Kant did not follow up on this ethico-political consequence of art for art's sake, Hannah Arendt explains, because it might have been risky to engage political philosophy and it was, in any case, redundant.<sup>30</sup> Judgment leads to political deliberation, she concludes. But the corollary between examined private pleasures and enhanced public sphere is news to most scholars today, good news that humanists might explore through programs that develop a taste for active (i.e. creative) citizenship.

Some artists and city governments, along with business interests, are already at work forging cultural citizenship and creative economies.<sup>31</sup> And research in education consistently links the practice and appreciation of arts with enhanced cognitive and social development.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps these links are worthy of more attention from the humanities, where the focus on aesthetic practices could include the ripple effects from pleasure to judgment and consequently to the common social sense that can sustain deliberation and collective action. Humanists who dedicate careers to identifying and teaching the particular enchantments of art make significant social contributions, whether or not they make conscious connections to politics and economics. Without drills in evaluating immediately pleasurable experience to determine whether it is free of interest or seduced by it, the faculty of judgment would remain as undeveloped as in premodern societies, where subjects are not obliged to judge but rather to obey within reason.

All the more reason for traditional humanists to stand firm, you may say, on the clearing of public ground that aesthetic education had pioneered. Any defense of that ground with arguments beyond the arts might, it seems, risk capitulation to the scandal of reduced faculties. But my point is that refusing allied arguments leaves the field almost defenseless today, paradoxically indifferent to the very claim of humanizing effects that follow from art and interpretation, effects that should justify financial support and moral standing. I am saying that it is misguided to refuse, on

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instruction and SAT scores. Dance instruction was connected to fluency in creative thinking and to reading skills. Drama, in the form of dramatic enactment, was connected to story comprehension, character understanding, and writing proficiency, and is shown to be a better way for students to process a story than teacher-led discussion. Multi-arts programs had

multiple connections: to reading, verbal, and math skills, and to creative thinking. Similar connections are present between art and social and emotional development. Dance is connected to self-confidence and persistence; music to self-efficacy and self-concept; drama to concentration, comprehension, conflict resolution, and self-

concept; multi-arts to achievement motivation, cognitive engagement, self-confidence, risk-taking, perseverance, and leadership. Several studies show children become more engaged in their studies when the arts are integrated into their lessons. Others show that at-risk students often find pathways through the arts to broader academic successes."

principled or disinterested grounds, to be reasonable about public and private fiscal priorities. For one thing, refusal confounds the disinterested experience of beauty with the scholarly meditation on its form and its effects. At a remove from art, scholarship is evaluated through its engagement with existing concepts, its rigor of argumentation and display of erudition. For another thing, the rebuff of reason shrivels Kant's ambitious project to link a love of form with respect for reflexive common sense. The rebuff, consequently, answers the scandal of reason with an equally scandalous reduction of human faculties to the one exercise of good taste.

In line with Kant's aesthetic formalism, Victor Shklovsky dismissed the academy's sententious defense of great ideas. Art has nothing to do with content, but everything to do with technique. Here as in Kant, the pleasures of art have indirect ethical and therefore practical effects, not through ideas but through pleasure: aesthetic experience rekindles a love for the world, reviving objects, events, and people deadened by habit. Without art, "life is reckoned as nothing. Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war. And art exists *that one may recover the sensation of life*."<sup>33</sup> I underline the commanding subjunctive construction. Humanists surely feel that ardor of purpose, but feeling will stay limited and subject-centered if it ignores Kant's lead toward grounding civil society in free judgment, and Shklovsky's invitation to care passionately for the world. One paradoxical result of rejecting practical arguments for the humanities is, as I hinted, to forfeit some credit for significant contributions that humanists normally make to society, credit we might invest in making more contributions. The guardians of human values can be curiously indifferent to our own effects on fellow humans.

33. Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique," (1917) in *Russian Formalist Criticism, Four Essays*, translated with intro. by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965) 3–24. p. 12.

34. John Beverley, *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) ISBN 0816628416.

35. George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003)

## To See Unseen

Another paradox is the practically positivist posture that humanists assume before a work of art, imagining that we are not seen in the act, as if observation could avoid participation and interference. Any good literary or cultural critic might comment on this lack of reflexivity in another discipline, say anthropology. David Stoll, for example, is reprehensibly blind to his effect on Guatemala's peace process; and Elizabeth Burgos Debray is naïve about her relationship to Rigoberta Menchú.<sup>34</sup> But literary criticism's generally carefree move from observation to commentary passes with hardly a notice. Humanists do indeed ask about the effects of teaching and scholarship on the poem or painting they study, but scarcely ever about the ripple effect of the study on readers or on the general social environment, unless the humanist does cultural studies.

Then the answers are characteristically critical and cautionary. Artists, scholars, and policy makers seem invariably to do more damage than good when they try to intervene in policy, because culture is not expedient.<sup>35</sup> If resistance were possible, without folding back into an oppressive system,

36. Cultural Studies has been openly political in the sense of resistant to hegemonic power. It has valued oppositional subcultures among workers and then, in the spirit of Herbert Marcuse, among youth. See Tony Jefferson (ed.), *Resistance Through Rituals*. (London: Hutchinson, 1976). And Dick Hebdige, *Subculture. The Meaning of Style*. (London: Methuen, 1979). Later developments engage audience responses to cultural practices, but not to the practice of interpreting the arts. See Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas*. (New York: Methuen 1985), and John Fiske, "British Cultural Studies and Television." *Channels of Discourse*, edited by R. C. Allen. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986) 254–289.
37. Jesús Martín Barbero, *De los medios a las mediaciones. Comunicación, cultura y hegemonía*. (México: G. Gil, 1987.) Also, Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
38. Ileana Rodríguez, "Estudios culturales: quiebres disciplinarios, cambios del oficio crítico y crisis de identidad en la época post-socialista" *Nuevo Texto Crítico* 25–28, eds. Adriana J. Bergero and Jorge Ruffinelli 2000–2001. 169–182. p. 174. "La diferencia fundamental entre los estudios culturales y los subalternos es que los estudios subalternos retienen una noción de agencia que les es central pero que a la vez refuncionalizan . . . Los estudios subalternos no hacen a un lado la ética, no reducen lo popular a los procesos de mercado y consumo, ni tampoco renuncian al telos." Pp 174, 176.
39. Alberto Moreiras "Retirar la cultura" *Nuevo Texto Crítico* 25–28, eds. Adriana J. Bergero and Jorge Ruffinelli 2000–2001 pp. 133–138. p. 134–5: "¿Si dijéramos que la pregunta misma por la productividad del saber, lejos de constituir el saber como posibilidad política, lo de-constituye hacia una facticidad cómplice con la cotidianidad política que nos vive y que no deja de vivimos por mucho que intentemos pagarle con su misma moneda, es decir, interpelar la interpelación misma, rizar el rizo de lo político, afirmar que, en política, todo es cuestión de afirmar más y mejor que el otro, el enemigo?" See also Charles Hale, "El indio permitido."
- opposition would at least be laudable in this view;<sup>36</sup> but artistic contributions to existing systems look worse than suspicious. Although some distinguished authors show that cultural practices, such as micro broadcasting or traditional arts and crafts geared to non-traditional markets, are complex enough to demonstrate agency by participants,<sup>37</sup> cultural studies more often dismisses even the agency to resist power as a self-defeating illusion. To celebrate popular practices, or give voice to voiceless subalterns,<sup>38</sup> ends up for this dour tone of cultural studies as complicity with repressive forces, including the very studies that privilege the poor in a polar distinction from the rich.<sup>39</sup> Nothing good can come of it, apparently, except for the pleasures and privileges of performing academic feats of argument about some cultural disaster and counter-arguments about even more disastrous practices, such as the exercise of cultural studies itself.
- The perspective squints at evidence of democratizing contributions through arts and interpretation. Critique and denunciation practically exhaust the range of results, as if creativity were always doomed to reinforce the political and economic constraints from which it presumes to wrest some freedom. The closed system in which friskiness necessarily bites its own tail suggests a systematic rejection of capitalist society. Whatever ingenious creations or interventions make the system tolerable are thereby guilty of complicity and deserving of critique. I confess to less systematic thinking and to finding strength in small judgments about art and its after-effects. Reformism may seem undignified to some critics, but I remember Rigoberta Menchú's response to dignified academics: "Only the privileged stop at critique," she taunted, "the rest of us need to develop solutions." If humanists today feel the pinch of tighter purse strings, and the squeeze of losing institutional ground to economists, political scientists, and other social scientists whose questions beg practical answers, it may be time for cultural studies to consider socially useful contributions by developing best cultural practices along with exposing the worst.
- For scholars of literature, painting, music, theater, and other arts, the question of social effect of interpretive work, as I said, hardly comes up.

This makes the question worth asking, to take a lesson from Pierre Macherey who identified the silences in literature as indicators of basic assumptions.<sup>40</sup> Widespread assent signals cultural foundations so solid that exposition becomes unthinkably redundant to writers and to their ideal readers. Other readers notice that something is missing. Think of literature students today. Do they ask, as mine do, why James Fennimore Cooper's gallant soldier preferred bland Alice over enchanting Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans*, or what the big deal is if Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* keeps her virginity or not, or how come the Inca Garcilaso de la Vega reports Old Testament rituals in ancient Peru? The archaeologically reconstructed answers are what Macherey listens for as the clearest indices of ideology, in Louis Althusser's sense of the word as a lived relationship to society.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps one effect of the increasingly estranged field occupied by the humanities can be a fresh, defamiliarized perspective on our own silent assumptions about what we do as humanists. The silence, I think, amounts to assuming that we do not, should not, and probably cannot, do much. Out loud humanists say with confidence that we study and report on culture and the arts. One unspoken assumption for the field is that culture refers to individual creativity, which can miss ritual or collective practices. Familiar questions about creativity focus on an object of study: What rhetorical devices make a poem worth re-reading? Or, how do novels make mischief with more properly called literary genres? Where do brushstrokes call attention to the process of painting? Or, when silent movies ceded to sound, which transnational charms got lost in translation and which were found in new layers of language arts? The range of existing research agendas, and their often fascinating results, stays relatively fixed on an object in order to render observations that have more or less descriptive power, are more or less right or wrong, true or false. J. L. Austin called this use of language "constative," practically the only use that philosophy had recognized for language, even though we do many more things with words. By naming performatives (e.g. a promise, a vow, a curse, or blessing), Austin moved philosophy beyond description toward recognizing the uses of language as intervention. He knew that the distinction between description and agency would blur, because naming has a constitutive effect, but the theoretical difference kept both functions in focus.<sup>42</sup> The lesson about what words do in the world, beyond vying for credibility, seems lost on the study of language arts. Surely it will be found when these arts include anticipation and accounts of the work words do.

For now, though, even when cultural studies break academic taboos about what counts for art, little evident reflection asks after the social effects of research and teaching. Add hip-hop to musicology, spoken word poetry to belles letters, graffiti to art history and scholarship can break out of an ivory tower but stay stuck behind an unremarked and therefore unexamined line between cultural products and interpretations of culture. Scholarship's binary business of seeing art and saying interpretation

40. Pierre Macherey: *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire*. (Paris: Maspero, 1966).

41. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses". The article appeared first in the French journal *La Pensée* in 1970; it was then reprinted in the collection of Althusser's articles translated into English by Ben Brewster and titled *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971, pp. 127–186).

42. J. L. Austin, *How to do things with words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

43. James Clifford *Predicament of Culture*; see also various edited volumes by Michael Fischer, George Marcus and James Clifford. On what one might call “Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle” in anthropology—i.e., how our presence in the field either transforms the object of study or how our discipline results from socio-political conditions that also transformed the object of study, see *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, edited by Talal Asad, and Asad’s article in Clifford and Marcus’s *Writing Culture*. My gratitude to J. Lorand Matory for guidance here.

44. Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle is basically that observation itself affects the outcome. For discussion of Heisenberg’s 1927 paper see W.C. Price and S.S. Chissick (eds.), *The Uncertainty Principle and the Foundations of Quantum Mechanics*, (New York: Wiley, 1977). Sometimes called quantum indeterminacy or the observer’s paradox, Heisenberg’s point is that observation itself affects an outcome. See also “Subjectivity and Reflexivity in the Social Sciences: Epistemic Windows and Methodical Consequences” Franz Breuer & Wolff-Michael Roth printed in <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/2-03/2-03intro-3-e.htm>

45. Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Op. cit.

imagines that it proceeds without being seen. Shuttling between the poles of art and report, alternating between point and click, humanist scholars silently assume that that movement doesn’t *interfere* with the context of study. When anthropologists noticed that imaginary line a generation ago, the result was to locate a blurry area of study where self-ethnographies develop along with collaborations between scientist and subject.<sup>43</sup> The penchant for reflexivity has generally upset the practices of positivist social science that had rejected earlier romantic impressionism by holding the line between colorful culture and black and white reporting. Even earlier, natural science had to consider how experiments interfere in studies.<sup>44</sup>

Interpreters of art seem strangely stiff and straight alongside these reflexive neighbors. Humanists don’t worry much about what we do with words. But since interference is unavoidable, the relevant questions should be about desired effects and about choices among research options. I am insisting a bit, but the issue of effects has apparently seemed doubly irrelevant: either they are negligible, or too patent to argue, given the humanizing value of humanists. On the one hand, the social consequences of making and interpreting the arts are barely worth considering in a world where art has become ornamental and commentary is demoted to adjusting the worth of ornaments. On the other hand, we sometimes defend the apparently impractical or apolitical quality of art and interpretation as a spiritual refuge for thinking and feeling beyond the technocratic narrowness of contemporary society. The economic viability of art is not at issue, as I said, now that defenders of the “creative economy” document the revitalizing capacity of artists [and gays] on struggling cities.<sup>45</sup>

The urgent issue today is the role of art and the humanities in civic development. Art’s socially constitutive appeal needs more advocates; otherwise, citizens may not appreciate art, including the art of interpretation, as the precious foundation of democratic life. This is no exaggeration. A disposition toward creativity, which acknowledges different points of view and more than one way to compose available material, resists authoritarian single-mindedness. Constitutional democracies that confer rights and obligations are themselves collective works of art.<sup>46</sup> And constitutions remain open to performative interventions, obliging citizens to remain creative.

46. Eric Slaughter, “The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution,” a book in preparation. Slaughter summarizes in a message of June 5, 2005: “The book will place the US Constitution in the

twin contexts: ... a commitment to an understanding of the state as a work of art (that is, the state as a non-natural entity); and a debate over the putative primacy of cultural life to political form (Does political

form determine cultural life, or is it the other way around?, a question first raised seriously in the Enlightenment and still alive in discussions of proposed constitutions for Iraq and Afghanistan).”

Either way, affirming that art and interpretation are among humanity's signature activities or doubting the effects of disengaged interpretation, humanists might pause for a self-reflexive moment: what exactly is the social value added by inquiry in the arts? It is time we engage the question, now that many others are asking it, as a preamble to budget cuts that threaten the foundations of free society.