The Virtues of Storytelling

As we have seen, the environmental justice movement is a highly localized struggle, most often arising in response to injustice affecting a specific community. For a popular movement to take off, an injustice must be uncovered and gain the widespread recognition of the people. Thus, the role of the village bard is just as important as that of international policy-makers.

Social change is never a merely intellectual process; it demands the engagement of the senses and the passions in addition to the intellect. In the words of Antonio Gramsci: “The intellectual’s error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned [...] that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people” (in Conquergood 2002, p.418). The arts provide a space for the engagement of the passions with the intellect and create a forum wherein the key paradigms that underlie a society can be called into question as necessary.

German philosopher Jurgen Habermas describes the process of ‘rational reconstruction’ as the means by which intuitive knowledge is systematically linguistically and philosophically coded into a ‘rational’, logical form (1979). ‘Rational reconstruction’ is used to make sense of external and internal realities via a process of interpretation (eg. interpreting a smile as benevolent), as opposed to generating theoretical knowledge via a process of deduction and description (eg. using the scientific method). Thus, according to Habermas' conception, a great proportion of what we construe as knowledge originates in a sensory-intuitive experience and subsequently becomes codified via a process of rationalization. As artistic creation is an expression of the sensory-intuitive
experience, art has the capacity to serve as a precursor to rationalized knowledge.

In a paper entitled *Interventions and Radical Research*, the performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood explores the "indirect, nonverbal and extralinguistic modes of communication [in society], rich in subversive meanings and utopian yearnings" (Conquergood 2002 p.148). Conquergood provides a particularly illuminative example of the phenomena of 'rational reconstruction' as conceptualized by Habermas in his discussion of the life narrative of the African- American abolitionist and former slave, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895). He quotes at length from Douglass’ memoirs, well worth reiterating:

But, on allowance day, those who visited the great house farm were peculiarly excited and noisy. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild notes. These were not always merry because they were wild. On the contrary, they were mostly of a plaintive cast, and told a tale of grief and sorrow. In the most boisterous outbursts of rapturous sentiment, there was ever a tinge of deep melancholy [...]. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress truly spiritual-minded men and women with the soul-crushing and death-dealing character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes [...]. Every tone was a testimony against slavery [...]. The hearing of those wild notes always [...] filled my heart with ineffable sadness [...] To those songs I trace my first glimmering conceptions of the dehumanizing character of slavery [...]. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds[...] If any one wishes to be impressed with a sense of the soul-killing power of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and, on allowance day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, thoughtfully analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because “there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.” (Douglass [1855] 1969:99 in Conquergood 2002 p. 145)

This selection of Douglass’ memoirs lends valuable insight into the capability of artistic expression to provide a means for the initial voicing and recognition of an injustice. Here, in taking in an artistic expression (ie. the singing of the slaves) Douglass’ understanding of the injustice of slavery can be seen to develop from the intuitive to rational stage: "...to those songs I trace my first glimmering conceptions of the dehumanizing character of slavery", by a process perhaps
akin to Habermas' 'rational reconstruction'. Douglass' memoirs provide a written record of how the slave songs - a human expression of an intuitive sensibility - serve as a key driving force in the movement towards the abolition of slavery.

Additionally since art communicates in a deeper form of language than words, it has the ability to 'de-professionalize' public debates, broadening citizen participation in addressing and identifying key social issues of our time. Conquergood acknowledges the ability of the arts to communicate in a language that transcends what he refers to as 'scriptocentrism', essentially the notion that 'everything there is to be known can be codified in text'. In reference to Michel Foucault's idea of "subjugated knowledges", he asserts that scriptocentrism is a form of epistemic violence that has "squeezed out... the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert- and all the more deeply meaningful for its refusal to be spelt out" (Conquergood, 312). Conquergood thus draws attention to the capability of art (in this case performance art) to exploit these other types of knowledge for a purpose of searching for truths and communicating understandings.

Take for example Pablo Picasso's Guernica, a painting which depicts the bombing of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. The work is remarkable in its ability to communicate the horrors of war in a language beyond words (Martin 2003). In addition to drawing international attention to the Spanish Civil War, it has become a global symbol of Anti-War movements (Martin 2003). A reproduction of the painting adorns the headquarters of the UN Security Council, whose stated mission is to "end the scourge of war." As a testament to the power of the artwork, US officials had the painting covered for the press conference in February 2003 in which the American government pressed to go to war with Iraq (Vallen 2003).

An example of a performance art that pertains directly to environmental justice, is a performance by ‘political tricksters’ and ‘corporate ethics activists’, the Yes Men, at the 2007 Gas and Oil Exposition in Calgary, Alberta. “Intended as a critique of the fossil fuel industry's influence on energy policy” (Keim 2007), the piece exploded the logical endpoints of the political prioritization of industry amidst current ecological crises. Posing as representatives of the Exxon- Mobil
CEO Lee Raymond, Andy Bichlbaum- posing as Shepard Wolff- had arranged to deliver a keynote lecture at a luncheon of the conference, to announce findings of Raymond’s study team, commissioned by the Department of Energy (Keim 2007). Bilchbaum / ‘Wolff’ opened his lecture by acknowledging the propensity of current energy policies to lead to “widespread global calamities” thereby posing a threat to oil industry (Keim 2007). Announcing the ‘results’ of the Exxon- Mobil study team’s findings, he announced that “in the worst case scenario, the oil industry could "keep fuel flowing" by transforming the billions of people who die into oil, called ‘Vivoleum’.

Figure: The Yes Men’s ‘Vivoleum Candles’

Bilchbaum/ ‘Woof’’s ‘research assistant’ Mike Bonnano or “Florian Ossenberg” announced that: "With more fossil fuels comes a greater chance of disaster, but that means more feedstock for Vivoleum. Fuel will continue to flow for those of us left." Keim (2007) reports that:

"The impostors led growingly suspicious attendees in lighting Vivoleum candles made, they said, from a former Exxon janitor who died from cleaning a toxic spill. When shown a mock video of the janitor professing his desire to be turned in death into candles, a conference organizer pulled Bonanno and Bichlbaum from the stage. As security guards led Bonanno from the room, Bichlbaum told reporters that "Without oil we could no longer produce or transport food, and most of humanity would starve. That would be a tragedy, but at least all those bodies could be turned into fuel for the rest of us.""
In the words of the German playwright Heiner Mueller: “the role of art is to mobilize the imagination” (Waltemath 2004). In 2005 Heavy Trash, "an anonymous arts organization of architects, designers and urban planners" set up viewing platforms on the streets of Los Angeles' gated communities, wherein the general public can look onto the properties of gated homes by climbing onto a platform and peering over (Heavy Trash 2005).

Figure: 'Viewing Platforms' into Los Angeles Gated Communities (Heavy Trash 2005)

Constructed after the viewing platforms at the Berlin Wall which historically allowed citizens from West Berlin to see into the East of the city, the platforms juxtapose past and present in order to spark debate on the right to block off access to parts of the city. In a statement on their official website, Heavy Trash voices their intent to promote dialogue on issues concerning privatization in urban planning. USC Lusk Center Director Ed Blakely and UC Berkeley professor Mary Gail Snyder comment: "When public services and even local government are privatized, when the community of responsibility stops at the gates, the
function and the very idea of democracy are threatened. Gates and barricades that separate people from one another also reduce people's potential to understand one another and commit to any common or collective purpose" (Heavy Trash 2005).

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