

## WHY ARTISTS AND CULTURAL WORKERS SHOULD GET POLITICAL

The arts organizations and arts workers in America cannot win the "Culture Wars" on their own. We are too isolated and powerless. We are ineffectual and disorganized. We are too narrowly focused on the National Endowments. We refuse to get involved in direct political action and our opponents have out thought us, out flanked us, out fundraised us and out positioned us.

The Far Right has been so politically effective that they have become the Center.

We have seen this coming. The Christian Coalition openly announced their political organizing goals over six years ago. They and other fundamentalist groups have brilliantly used their evangelical skills to translate their religious beliefs into public policy directives and have successfully mobilized their constituency into direct, purposeful action.

It is instructive to take a quick look at how the Christian Coalition achieved its prominence. The Christian Coalition had its origins in the failed 1988 Presidential of televangelical, Pat Robertson. Mr. Robertson is the producer of the 700 Club, founder of the Christian Broadcast Network and owner of cable television outlet The Family Channel. The 1988 campaign provided a political mailing list of activists and contributors and the mechanics of the campaign put Christian Coalition operatives in touch with local people in and out of traditional party positions who responded to Robertson's message.

The Christian Coalition has pursued its goals with creativity, diligence and discipline. I have samples of their mailings going back to 1990.

They said bluntly that their goal was to have caucuses in every county in America by 1998 and they are on track. They have a massive direct mail fundraising operation. They publish a national magazine and state newsletters. They have a direct action machine for flooding elected officials with letters, faxes and email. They conduct grassroots training across the country. They hold an annual a national training conference, "The Road to Victory", which is held in their own hotel-conference center in Virginia. At this conference major Republican office holders and seekers hold forth. In 1996 they distributed 45 million voter guides through 125,000 churches.

Ralph Reed, the executive director of the Christian Coalition is the mastermind behind the transformation of the Christian Coalition's public face -- moving it away from shrill attacks on the freedom of choice and gays to focus on such things as tax issues and school choice. They have been fabulously successful. They claim 1.7 million members but U.S. Postal Service data for 1995 show their magazine, "Christian American",

being mailed to some 310,000 people. Regardless, they have moved beyond their core constituency and have captured the mainstream political agenda.

Much has been written about the Christian Coalition and their more strident allies. We saw them at work in 1990, 1992, 1994 AND 1996 and did nothing.

Progressive America has been unable to fashion a platform, communicate a vision, field a viable candidate and mobilize a solid, mobilized base. The incompetence of the creative community to move powerfully in the public arena is just part of a much larger failure of vision and action.

The question is -- what are we going to do in 1998?

The answer is we must get political. Politics is much more than voting every four years. It means gathering, discussing, acting in unity, working with allies and using critical analysis to judge your progress. You start with your base and work outwards. Politics, it has often been said, is the science of addition and multiplication -- never subtraction or division.

And let us be very clear about one thing. This exercise is about vision and it is about power. We engage in politics to achieve power to act according to our values and beliefs. All activities undertaken by the Christian Coalition are designed to accumulate power to their members and their beliefs. We must act in like fashion. Any progressive arts gathering or conference or seminar that brings people together to discuss, analyze or whine that does not address the issue of power and how to get it does the field a disservice and puts that much further behind the opposition.

I recommend the following strategy to Chicago arts activists (which can be repeated in other cities) and to national arts leaders:

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR CHICAGO:**

Merge the various arts service organizations: The League of Chicago Theatres, the Chicago Music Alliance, the Chicago Dance Coalition, the Chicago Artists Coalition and the African-American Arts Alliance. Move the new organization out of the Loop to a neighborhood location. Mount an industry wide campaign for political education and voter registration. Push for an industry wide self-imposed tax to fund political education and action. Hire a lobbyist for City Hall. Combine mailing lists and give them to a new ArtsPAC that will directly support progressive candidates with contributions and creative resources.

The idea is to mobilize our base and use the tools and resources we have to build political power.

The new combined Chicago Arts Alliance should enter into dialog with the progressive social and community based coalitions that have been fighting for a human agenda. We should be aligned with groups who have been fighting to improve the human infrastructure in Chicago and the nation. I am thinking of groups like the Chicago Rehab Network, the school reform movement pioneer Designs for Change, the Neighborhood Capitol Budget Group, the Coalition for New Priorities, Operation PUSH, progressive labor unions, the nurses union, senior citizens groups, good government groups like the Civic Federation and the Taxpayers Union.

In addition, we should work with broad based citizen's organizations such as the Industrial Areas Foundation which is organizing a new city-suburb, inter-faith, inter-racial citizen's organization for social justice.

Our new Chicago Arts Alliance should organize ward by ward arts support groups to educate and pressure our alderman about cultural issues. We should organize a City Council Arts Caucus of at least 15 alderman who represent the wards with 85% of Chicago's arts groups.

We should decentralize our arts groups out of the Lake front wards and actively seek the growth of new arts groups and centers in neighborhoods across the city. We need to encourage our established arts groups to reconnect to our neighborhoods and go beyond "outreach" efforts to establish innovative and genuinely collaborative efforts with nonarts community based groups.

Most people do not make art. Many people have a chance to merely visit with art. Polls and studies show that more people would make and experience art if the art was cheaper to purchase, if it was closer to their homes and if it could be demonstrated as relevant to their experiences. Our strongest advocates are our patrons, customers and collaborators.

But the arts community has made a fatal mistake over the past 30 years. In an effort to spread out beyond New York and Los Angeles, arts groups have adopted a corporate model of organization and operation. They have concentrated on selling and marketing. In sum, their major message to the general public has been "Visit Me". Arts groups have, by and large, measured their success by counting the number of visits they have accrued (of people visiting the arts site or some aspect of the arts group visiting somewhere else).

What the arts groups have failed to do is build solid relationships with people. They certainly have not built lasting relationships with the neighborhoods in which they are located. As a result, we have a hard time rallying citizens to our cause. In 1990, when the League of Chicago Theaters mounted a concerted campaign to mobilize theater goers to support

the reauthorization of the NEA, many of our patrons thought we were speaking about the National Education Association.

Contrast this approach to the Ecology movement. This year was the 27th anniversary of Earth Day. Every school child knows what ecology is and we all have a generation of accumulated knowledge that allows to consider complex issues of the environment, human cause-and-effect and issues relating to the relationships between growth and undesired side effects. But consider the learning curve the environmental movement has taken the American public through. We have had mass movements, marches, millions of direct mail pieces, school lessons, public awareness campaigns and endless speeches.

Citizens have enough experience and knowledge to respond passionately and purposefully when they perceive a threat to the environment from various quarters. They can be mobilized to respond based on their values and self-interest.

So how effective have we been at communicating the intricacies, power and needs of the creative eco-system? How clear have we been in showing where the individual artist fits into this creative "food chain"? How moving have we been in decrying the poisoning effects of those who are dumping toxic wastes into the creative water table and polluting our creative resources? Lousy, that's how.

We have an opportunity to change this condition here in Chicago. Chicago is a city of neighborhoods. Our neighborhoods have an incredible mix of community support groups -- churches, block clubs, chambers of commerce, community development organizations and community coalitions of every persuasion. By seeking to link up with these groups, artists and arts producing entities can find new allies and new audiences.

One place to start to sharpen our skills and build consensus around an arts and public policy agenda would be to hold a series of political education workshops entitled "How They Did It -- How You Can Build Your Political Base and Take Over Congress" (or some other provocative title). Presenters would speak on the organizing and political tactics and tools of the Right and see hard information on voter turnout and political demographics. We would hear from successful organizers of civil rights, gay rights and labor movements. We would also learn about the political economy of late 20th century America and learn about the U.S. budget allocations and tax injustice from experts from the Committee for a New Priorities (part of the national Campaign for New Priorities -- remember the Peace Dividend from the end of the Cold War?).

Finally, arts activists could brainstorm with activists from these fields to see how we can join talents to create a winning agenda.

Chicago has a rich history of community organizing and confronting power with truth. The progressive arts community here needs to get in collective action with other progressive fighters to change the local urban agenda.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR NATIONAL ACTION:**

The American Arts Alliance should merge its advocacy efforts with People for the American Way, the National Alliance for Artists Organizations, the Association of American Cultures and the National Campaign for Freedom of Expression. They should form a national FreedomPAC and seek the ACLU, the National Education Association, the Urban League, the YMCA, the Federation for the Separation of Church and State, the software industry, the entertainment industry, the National Organization of Women, the National Council of Social Workers, the progressive labor movement and anyone else who is threatened by the militarization of American and the swift movement to the Right. This political effort would require the creation of a new umbrella organization. This new entity would not be a nonprofit and thus able to engage in politics.

I suggest a national campaign in 1998 to register one million people to vote via the arts and entertainment industry. This would be a massive arts version of "Rock the Vote." This is a nonpartisan effort and all arts groups could participate under existing regulations. This campaign should be focused on young people, people of color and the poor (In September, 1996, the Christian Coalition announced a campaign to register one million voters in two months).

This new entity would use all the creative power of the arts and entertainment to communicate a new vision of patriotism - that Americans must participate in democracy to have democracy. We should create exciting means for grassroots leadership training, citizen's forums and other activities to reweave America's shredded social fabric.

I would also suggest that "arts/entertainment stars" help create a 24 hour cable "AMERICA SINGS CREATIVITY CHANNEL" -- this could be run by the Independent Television Network, Deep Dish TV, the National Alliance for Media Centers or some other platform collaboration. This channel would be supplied by programmers across the country with stars donating time and resources to produce the widest type of programming, talk shows, news spots, community tv segments and commercially produced product. This channel would plug freedom of expression, the power of creativity, grassroots activism and tell stories of everyday people who are helping to improve their communities. Like the Christian Broadcasting Network it would run an 800 number for direct support of the channel and other national creativity, leadership training and arts boosting projects.

I further suggest that all arts related training schools institute a mandatory course covering the topic of "Arts and Public Policy." Most young artists are being trained to live in a mythical art market. For example, the actors and designers being trained at the splendid facilities at Northwestern University will encounter similar resources in perhaps 30 theaters in America. Painters and other visual artists coming out of the Art Institute are being trained to produce commodities for an arts market that follows the whim and fashion of a moneyed elite.

I am not saying that all performing artists need to do Brecht and all painters need to do neighborhood murals. But I think our young artists definitely need to be exposed to a critical analysis of the arts industry into which they are heading. They need to be exposed to questions of cultural policy and economics. They need to be exposed to the history and impact of The First Amendment - which is the Operating System under which all creativity in America flourishes. After all, it is just a piece of paper in a glass box in Washington. It has no agency to enforce itself or defend itself. That is up to us. Does the creative worker owe a debt or responsibility TO the First Amendment?

We need to establish on-going political training sessions for those arts workers who wish to change the political landscape. We should encourage arts workers to run for office at all levels of government. We have a great deal of work to do in this arena. Artists are innovative problem solvers and can bring a tremendous resource to public service. It is time to stand up and enter political competition as arts workers and learn how to put our creativity to work in new ways.

I was organizing artists here to be engaged in direct political action, including voter registration, candidate endorsement, campaign work, fund raising, community organizing, leadership training and running for local school council. It was extremely difficult and frustrating work -- no more so, I expect, that trying to activate any group or profession. But I will always remember one conversation I had with an artist. I was trying to get this person to volunteer for a pro-arts candidate in her area. She said that she had no time for campaign work, that her limited time must be spent in the studio -- that was how she was changing the world. I replied that America was founded on the idea that average people would be informed and take their turns governing, putting down the plow (or the paintbrush) so to speak, to run for office and serve, and then return home after serving. You will be creating on a bigger canvas, and your community will be a work-in-progress and your constituents will be your collaborators.

### **THE REALLY BIG PICTURE:**

Our arts leaders must link with the best progressive thinkers in the human service and human development fields. **The idea is to take the lead in crafting an American Agenda for the 21st Century for our city and nation**

**that makes human development our top political and programmatic priority.** Our task is to show our colleagues how the arts fit squarely in the center of such an agenda.

We need to start linking with our colleagues in the education, human services and community building movements who have been battered by the Contract on America and the devastation of 17 years of decreased government funding for human needs and the false doctrine that government cannot solve persistent social ills.

We need to link local agendas with the national agenda -- and make the case that our ability to deliver on the promise of an American Agenda will never be realized unless cities and other localities can keep their federal taxes close to home. For example, in 1990 Chicago experienced a net loss of \$7.7 billion in federal tax dollars due to military spending. That is, the Chicago metropolitan area sent \$8.6 billion to the Pentagon and received \$891 million back in contracts, expenditures and military salaries.

In 1990 over \$58 billion of net Pentagon losses were concentrated in 25 metropolitan areas, each with losses of \$1 billion or more. This, coupled with the loss of manufacturing jobs from our cities over the past 20 years, has resulted in a virtual looting of our cities in the name of militarism and national security. If our cities could recapture or keep just 25% of these dollars, we could put our collective imaginations to work with our new allies and solve many of our pressing social and infrastructure needs.

We need to help frame the dialog and show how the very same politicians who are attacking the arts and all manner of education, social and preventative programs are the ones who engineered a massive shift of income from America's poor and working classes to the very wealthiest 1/5 of our citizens. This is on top of and in addition to the obscene savings and loan bailout that our grandchildren will be paying off well into the next century. We have been and continue to be massively ripped off and it is time to make a huge stink about it. Democrats and Republicans alike are to blame.

## **CONCLUSION**

I offer these suggestions out of my experience and passion. They come after seven years of work in community development, arts advocacy efforts, action campaigns, research and reflection. My basic feeling that what has passed for arts advocacy has been narrowly focused, self-serving, ineffective and has served to further isolate America's progressive social movements. I wish I were better read and more eloquent. I wish my reasoning was more coherent and my biases less intrusive. I offer criticism and I have taken more than my fair share of it -- but I do so in

the spirit of solidarity and strategy. As I write this, I feel a strange mixture of sorrow, cynicism, anger and opportunity.

We are less than three years away from the 21st century. Our nation is speeding over that bridge we keep hearing about. Do you want to have a hand on the steering wheel, or do you want to be run over by the Far Right and their allies? If you want to get to a better place -- you need to learn to drive, have a roadmap, master a little auto mechanics, pick some traveling companions and get off the porch and into the front seat!

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