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The Role of Public Art in Understanding the Other

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The ever expanding field of technology continually brings human beings closer to each other. We can instantaneously communicate with someone halfway around the world by phone or through the internet. We can travel to any part of the globe in less than one day. Unfortunately, as world events in this new millennium have demonstrated, proximity does not necessarily translate into synthesis. The divisions that continue between cultures suggest that mere coexistence may not be enough to challenge our perceptions about ourselves and each other.

This issue of cultural divides is brought into dialogue in Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society, a book based on the Carnegie Hall Talks between Daniel Barenboim, conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra until 2006 and of Jewish Russian descent, and Edward Said, a Palestinian-American, author, and University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University until his death in 2003. According to Said, “[t]here is more of a concentration today on the affirmation of identity, on the need for roots, on the values of one’s culture and one’s sense of belonging. It’s become quite rare to project one’s self outward, to have a broader perspective.”¹ When Barenboim ponders the question of why political conflicts and national conflicts are deeper and pettier than ever before, Said responds that there are two reasons. One is “the reaction *against* homogenization,” which can cause one to defend oneself “against the sense of an all-encompassing global atmosphere” by returning to “comfortable symbols of the past.” The second reason he offers is what he calls “the legacy of empires.” Said maintains that “[b]oth of these factors have produced xenophobia and identity conflict which are endemic to modernity and very dangerous.”²

Is it possible to maintain the diversities that give each culture its uniqueness while striving to create a bond of unity within the human race? And is it possible for art in general, and public art in particular, to help overcome the problems of which Said and Barenboim speak? People have always used artistic symbols to understand and explain their world. Art has historically enabled a human being to explore, question, and make sense of not only the individual self but also the culture in which one lives. Yet, when we move from private interpretation of art to public interaction with art, a question arises: What role can public art play in creating an awareness, understanding, and appreciation of other cultures? As Hilde Hein explains in “What is Public Art? Time, place, and meaning,” artists have “the ability to speak in a rich variety of languages - verbal, visual, conceptual, sensual, serious, humorous, figurative, and rational. Sometimes and somehow

they break through ordinary expectation and cause people to venture upon new perspectives [. . .] because their insightful expression ignites response."³ When public art engages with a community in this manner, such effects are multiplied and intensified by the nature of the communal interaction with the art.

In 1999, Barenboim, Said, and cellist Yo-Yo Ma collaborated on a musical project in Weimer, Germany. They brought together Arab, Israeli, and German musicians, mostly between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, to play as one orchestra. During the day, the students had orchestral rehearsals led by Barenboim, master classes conducted by Ma, and practices with chamber music groups. Several evenings a week discussions were facilitated by Said on music, culture, and politics, among other topics. Near the beginning of this music camp, a Jewish musician tried to join a group that was improvising Arabic music, only to be told by someone in the group, "You can't play Arabic music. Only Arabs can play Arabic music."⁴ Ten days later, the same youth who had made this claim was teaching Yo-Yo Ma how to tune his cello to the Arabic scale. As Said said, "Obviously [. . .] [the young man now] thought Chinese people could play Arabic music. Gradually, the circle extended and they were all playing the Beethoven Seventh. It was quite an extraordinary event. [. . .] One set of identities was superseded by another. [. . .] All of them suddenly became cellists and violinists playing the same piece in the same orchestra under the same conductor."⁵

Barenboim noted the level of ignorance the students displayed about each other. Most of the students had little or no knowledge about the other students' cultures, and the perceptions they did have were mostly negative ones. One boy, who held very negative views about one of the other cultural groups represented at the music camp, ended up sharing a music stand in the orchestra with someone from that cultural group. Barenboim believes that the experience of cooperation necessitated by trying to do something together that they both passionately cared about changed them. As he said, "having achieved that [. . .], they already can't look at each other the same way, because they have shared a common experience."⁶ Here we see the use of public art to bridge cultural divides with a relatively small number of people. Can the same effect be achieved with a broader, perhaps city-wide, effort?

One American city that is attempting to use public art to promote cultural awareness is Chicago, Illinois. Historically, Chicago has been a crossroads for the world with numerous immigrant and ethnic groups settling there. Some of the more populous ethnic groups include those of African, Hispanic, Chinese, Arabian, Indian, Jewish, and Korean descent, as well as those of Caucasian descent, including a significant percentage of people of Irish, Polish, Greek, and Italian heritage. More recently, the city has seen an increase in immigrants from several Eastern European countries and Russia as well. Since the beginning of the third millennium, there has been a concerted effort by the city government and various civic and cultural organizations to elevate the public's awareness and appreciation of the various ethnicities within the community. These attempts have resulted in free public access to numerous musical and dance performances, artistic displays, and public discourses. Collaboration between several organizations, the city government, and the public has enabled people to actively partake in dance, artistic, musical, and literary projects, all of which are designed to help the public explore and heighten its appreciation of the multitude of cultures within both the city and the world.

One of the largest undertakings of this kind in Chicago took place from June 2006 to June 2007. Silk Road Chicago was a year-long, citywide celebration inspired by the art and culture of the historic Silk Road. In 1998, cellist Yo-Yo Ma created the non-profit Silk Road Project. The concept for the project derives from the cultural and musical exchanges that took place among travelers and communities on the historic Silk Road. Ma's vision for this project is to connect the world's neighborhoods through music. Part of the philosophy of the Silk Road Project is based on the belief that "event-based *interactions* are essential for creating connections between people of diverse backgrounds" (emphasis added).⁷ Silk Road Chicago was a collaboration among the Silk Road Project, the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs, the Chicago Office of Tourism, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the Art Institute of Chicago, and it offered more than 250 events over the course of the year, including music, art, and dance performances (some of which allowed for audience participation), as well as educational programs for teachers, students, and the general public. The year began and ended with free outdoor concerts led by Ma and other Silk Road Project musicians in which the audiences were introduced to music from countries along the historic Silk Road and a retelling of an ancient Chinese mythical tale accompanied by music. Dorothy Coyle, Director of Chicago's Office of Tourism, called this collaborative effort "a year long celebration of cultural diversity and artistic expression" which used "the Silk Road as a metaphor for an exchange of ideas and culture."⁸

In an interview for the July-August 2006 issue of *World Literature Today*, Ma further discusses his vision for the Silk Road Project. He states that he founded the Silk Road Project because "I believe we're not as isolated as we think we are. One of the ideas we talk about at the project is how important it is to know your neighbors, both our next-door neighbors and our halfway-around-the-world neighbors."⁹ In a later interview with Phillip Huscher from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Ma explains that he has

come to believe that, and I think we know, genetically, that there are more similarities than differences. I also believe that there's something in society that tries to look for minute differences and to magnify those differences in order to have some kind of categorization or stratification. That's obviously useful for certain purposes, but I think for other purposes it can be really destructive. Ultimately, I do believe we have more similarities than differences, but we make much more of the differences.¹⁰

In addition to the variety of music that Chicagoans enjoyed during the year-long Silk Road Project, the city has also offered the week-long World Music Festival every September for the past nine years. Last year's festival featured both traditional and contemporary music from 29 countries as well as numerous educational workshops designed to help the participants learn about and appreciate the musical traditions of other countries.

The plaza of Richard J. Daley Center in downtown Chicago is the site of many of the city's popular ethnic festivals that are held each year, including a Turkish Festival, Chicago Arabesque (an Arab Festival), Indian Independence Day Festival, and Christkindlemarket (a German American festival based on a traditional German outdoor market). In addition to the festivals, each November and December the holiday traditions of three major religions are highlighted in the plaza by displaying a Christian manger, an Islamic crescent, and a Jewish menorah, in addition to a Christmas tree, which is displayed in many American homes whether or not the people in the home celebrate Christmas as a religious holiday.

In 2004, a photography exhibition titled "Family Album" was showcased from June to September at Chicago's Millennium Park. 100 of the photographs in Uwe Ommer's book, "1000 Families," were on display, enlarged to fit on four feet by five feet cards. The photographs that were chosen for display included representations of most of the ethnic communities that make up Chicago's population. For his book, Ommer spent more than four years traveling to 130 countries, returning home with over 1,000 photographs of families from every level of society in the various countries. The displayed photographs were accompanied by Ommer's descriptions of the families from his book, and, in some instances, a family member's own words. Some of the comments particularly highlight the message of unity that Ommer hopes to spread with his book. An 81 year old Ivory Coast prize-winning author believes that "we're all alike – colour doesn't count for anything, it's time people understood they must get together."¹¹ The father of a family originally from Egypt and Libya, now residing in and operating a literary café in New Mexico in the United States, declares that "Tribes must rub shoulders and learn to live with both their own traditions and other people's."¹²

One event in Chicago that requires those in attendance to rub shoulders is Summerdance, an eleven week long event held every summer for the past twelve years. Four evenings a week Chicagoans are able to participate in a free one hour dance lesson followed by a two hour dance. What makes Summerdance especially interesting is that dances from the world over are introduced every summer. Chicagoans have had the opportunity to learn dances from countries as diverse as India, Brazil, Greece, Romania, Russia, and Mexico. Hopefully, in the process of having fun, they have gained a little more appreciation for the cultures as well.

Another attempt at unifying the city's diverse groups resulted in One Book, One Chicago, a citywide book club that introduces two books per year, fall and spring, for the community to read at the same time. As the introduction on the One Book website explains, "Reading great literature provokes us to think about ourselves, our environment and our relationships. Talking about great literature with friends, family and neighbors often adds richness and depth to the experience of reading."¹³ Since the program was inaugurated in 2001, the city has introduced books written by African-American, Russian, Jewish, and Indian-American authors, and many of these books have chronicled life experiences from the perspectives of the author's ethnic group.

Can simply reading about another's experiences help us to connect with each other? In a 1967 interview for *Newsday* magazine, African American writer, Ralph Ellison, commented on his early experiences with reading Nobel Prize winner and Caucasian American author Ernest Hemingway:

At first I was puzzled when I began to read Ernest Hemingway . . . as to just why his stories could move me but I couldn't reduce them to a logical system. [. . .] Then I began to look at my own life through the lives of fictional characters. [. . .] I began, in other words, quite early to connect the worlds projected in literature and poetry and drama and novels with the life in which I found myself.¹⁴

If reading great literature "provokes us to think about ourselves [. . .] and our relationships," as the One Book, One Chicago website states, then reading great literature by authors from a culture different from our own can provoke us to not only think about that culture, but, more importantly, perhaps rethink our preconceived ideas about that culture.

In his book, Sadhana: The Realisation of Life, Nobel Prize winner and Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore discusses the importance of aesthetics as a key to a greater understanding. In comparing humankind's continual refusal to accept limits on its knowable world in the scientific field to our idea of beauty, he states that "our sense of beauty is similarly engaged in ever pushing on its conquests. Truth is everywhere, therefore everything is the object of our knowledge. Beauty is omnipresent, therefore everything is capable of giving us joy."¹⁵ He emphasizes that "in the history of aesthetics there [. . .] comes an age of emancipation when the recognition of beauty in things great and small becomes easy, and when we see it more in the unassuming harmony of common objects than in things startling in their singularity."¹⁶

The contemplation of beauty greatly interested the English poet, John Keats. He ends his famous poem, "Ode to a Grecian Urn," with two of the most discussed lines in English poetry: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," - that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."¹⁷ In Sadhana, Tagore attempts to explain the meaning of those lines:

When [. . .] [man] has the power to see things detached from self-interest and from the insistent claims of the lust of the senses, then alone can he have the true vision of the beauty that is everywhere. Then only can he see that what is unpleasant to us is not necessarily unbeautiful, but has its beauty in truth [. . .] Through our sense of truth we realize law in creation, and through our sense of beauty we realize harmony in the universe. [. . .] This is the ultimate object of our existence, that we must ever know that 'beauty is truth, truth beauty'; we must realize the whole world in love, for love gives it birth, sustains it, and takes it back to its bosom.¹⁸

It is true that giving a community access to public art cannot guarantee public understanding of either the art or the culture that it represents. As African American author James Baldwin explains, "any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, [. . .] the end of safety. And at such a moment unable to see and not daring to imagine what the future will now bring forth, one clings to what one knew, or thought one knew."¹⁹ Although public art alone will not resolve the misunderstandings and mistrust we so often see between ethnic groups, it is a good place to begin. Ma once said that "I truly believe that human imagination and creativity can transcend the immediate environment that you come from."²⁰ This can be just as true for the recipient of that imagination and creativity as it is for the giver. Art can show us that we have more similarities than differences, and such common ground can be the basis for discourse, which, hopefully, will lead to better understanding of and cooperation among the people of this world.

¹ Barenboim, Daniel and Edward W. Said. *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society*. Ed. Ara Guzelimian. New York: Pantheon, 2002. 11.

² Barenboim and Said. 14.

³ Hein, Hilde. "What is Public Art? Time, place, and meaning." *Arguing About Art: Contemporary Philosophical Debates*. 2nd ed. Ed. Neill, Alex and Aaron Ridley. London: Routledge, 2002. 442.

⁴ Barenboim and Said. 8.

⁵ Barenboim and Said. 9-10.

⁶ Barenboim and Said. 10.

⁷ *Silk Road Project*. <http://www.silkroadproject.org/events/index.html>.

⁸ Mathie, Frank. "Famous cellist kicks off year-long event at Chicago Cultural Center." abc7.chicago.com. May 2, 2006. June 30, 2007. <http://abclocal.go.com/wls/story?section=local&id=4136201>.

⁹ Johnson, Michelle. "Along the Silk Road: An Interview with Yo-Yo Ma." *World Literature Today*. July-Aug. 2006: 7-8.

¹⁰ Huscher, Phillip. "Silk Road Chicago: An Unprecedented Adventure." *Notebook: Chicago Symphony Orchestra*. Nov.-Dec. 2006: 19.

¹¹ Ommer, Uwe. *1000 Families*. Ed. Nina Schmidt. Cologne: Taschen. 2002. 217.

¹² Ommer, Uwe. 93.

¹³ "One Book, One Chicago." Chicago Public Library. <http://www.chipublic.org/003cpl/oboc/oboc.html>.

¹⁴ qtd. in Baym, et al. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. 6th ed. Vol. E. New York: Norton, 2003. 2065.

¹⁵ Tagore, Rabindranath. *Sadhana: The Realisation of Life*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2005. 118.

¹⁶ Tagore. 119-20.

¹⁷ Keats, John. "Ode to a Grecian Urn." *Romanticism: An Anthology With CD-Rom*. Ed. Duncan Wu. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000. 1061.

¹⁸ Tagore. 120-1.

¹⁹ Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name*. 1961. New York: Vintage, 1991. 117.

²⁰ Huscher, Phillip. 16.