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This is the text of a talk I gave on 8 April 2022 at the Community Built Association conference held at the Kaneko Foundation in Omaha, NE. I began by telling the assembled community-based artists and designers that I'd found it easier to react than to think during the last two years. My aim in this talk was to invite all of us to think about—rather than react to—the great questions life now poses. I hope you find it useful.

Possibility, Power, and Purpose: Sensing the Demand

I know this puts me out of sync with the calendar, and I hope I don't have to prove that I'm not a Scrooge, but I have to tell you that I had *A Christmas Carol* moment when I began to think about what I wanted to share with you this morning as we consider what history, integrity, and the future are demanding of us now.

The Ghost of Cultural Politics Past appeared in my office, saying it was time to learn my lesson. The Ghost took me on whirlwind tour of my advocacy for cultural democracy. For those who aren't familiar with the concept, cultural democracy stands for pluralism, participation, and equity in relation to culture.

I'd taken a similar trip down memory lane in 2020 when the organization Imagining America gave me an award. The talk I presented was entitled "In My Secret Life: (Nearly) Fifty Years in Pursuit of A New WPA." You may know that the WPA was the federal program begun as part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal, addressing epidemic unemployment by putting people back to work for the public good, including five massive arts job initiatives.

The PowerPoint I put together for that talk started with flyers I designed in the early Seventies when I worked for the San Francisco Neighborhood Arts Program, which hosted one of the first public service employment programs since the Thirties. It was funded by CETA, the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. Back in those days, I was an organizer for the San Francisco Art Workers Coalition, a group of community-based artists from many disciplines and practices: performing artists from the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Pickle Family Circus, and many other groups; community muralists, community gardeners, musicians, filmmakers, all of us coming together to focus on accountability for public cultural spending and policy.

When the first CETA jobs opened up in San Francisco, hundreds of artists lined up to apply. The program quickly spread across the country. Most community-based artists who were around in the 1970s will either have had a CETA job or worked closely with someone who did. CETA jobs were for all kinds of work, but just the arts part of the program equaled about \$200 million a year (\$400 or \$500 million in current dollars). All those artists lost their jobs the minute Ronald Reagan was elected President and eliminated public service employment from the federal budget.

That was a bummer.

The Ghost of Cultural Politics Past continued our tour with a montage of policy proposals and manifestos I was involved with, beginning in 1988 when I coauthored a chapter on “Cultural Democracy: A New Cultural Policy for the United States,” in the Institute for Policy Studies’ book *Winning America: Ideas and Leadership for the 1990s*.

Things picked up in the 2000s. In 2004, I teamed up with Dee Davis and Dudley Cocke—who then both worked at Appalshop in Whitesburg, KY—to see if we could get community-based artists interested in cultural policy questions. We wrote the “Artists Call for Cultural Policy,” addressed to all of that year’s presidential candidates, got a number of well-known community artists to sign on, and invited everyone to endorse the platform.

Many ways that artists here and abroad had called for cultural democracy were featured in my book *New Creative Community*, published in 2006. Obama was elected President a couple of years later. Hoping that he would endorse a new WPA or CETA-type program as well as equity in cultural funding and other issues people cared about, some of us organized a White House meeting to plead our case. We didn’t get anything out of the White House, but we did go to Busboys & Poets café afterwards and divide into groups to talk about the issues we wanted to follow up on. Jeff Chang and I convened one on policy, and two things came out of that.

First, another petition. Starting with 36 people who had been at the White House meeting, we put out six points toward cultural democracy and conceived a project called “Cultural Recovery,” arguing that culture was essential to national recovery from the Great Recession triggered by the financial crisis of 2007-2008. Some of the people who signed on may be familiar. I’ll just mention Judy Baca and Rick Lowe as two of the visual artists.

The Ghost and I fast-forwarded through the seven years I was Chief Policy Wonk of the US Department of Arts and Culture, reviewing our policy platforms, such as 2016’s *Standing for Cultural Democracy*. Like its precedents, it called for a new WPA: investment in human rights and racial equity; shifting the United States from its status as Incarceration Nation, with the planet’s biggest culture of punishment; addressing our chief cultural deficit, belonging; and much more.

By then, **The Ghost of Cultural Politics Past** told me its energy was starting to flag, and I felt the same. “So what’s the lesson,” I asked, “that none of this worked?”

“That’s how you’ve been feeling,” the Ghost told me, “but that’s because what you mean by *working* is being adopted, implemented, signed on the dotted line, and made into history.”

“I suppose so,” I said. “Despite all the effort they took, none of these petitions or proposals were carried out.”

“True,” said The Ghost. “And wouldn’t it have been nice if they had? But is the only value of these things if they are adopted and enforced? You humans repeatedly fail to live up to even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But think: the fact that we can say people fail to live up to it is its value. It expresses who we want to be. Without these articulations, how do you put generative ideas into circulation? How do you hold people to account?”

Good point. After that I needed a little nap to integrate the idea that perhaps I wasn't a failure, just unclear on what success meant.

The next thing I knew, **The Ghost of Cultural Politics Present** woke me up. That Ghost peppered me with questions, which was a little annoying, but I do respect the Socratic method. Let me share two of its questions with you:

- “This seems to be a pretty busy and chaotic time on Planet Earth. The whole place reminds me of a triage unit. Everyone is trying to figure out what's most important to do next, and everything is changing all the time. Have you got anything to offer that might make that easier, or at least more bearable?”
- “Is the old way of doing cultural politics—getting folks together to put their best vision into writing, gathering supporters and advocates, pleading with officials—is that the best way? Is there a different path forward now?”

I appreciated the questions even though they made me feel a little uneasy, and more than a little confused. The Ghost suggested I do some research, and the starting-place that popped into my head was Vaclav Havel's 1978 pamphlet, *The Power of the Powerless*.

You may have heard of Havel as the last president of Czechoslovakia from 1989 until the dissolution of that state in 1992 and then as the first president of the Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003. He was the first democratically elected president of either country. He was also an artist. He started out as a playwright, writing mostly absurdist comedies satirizing the state. After participating in the opening of Czech society called Prague Spring in 1968, he was blacklisted when Czechoslovakia was invaded by a joint operation of the Soviet Union, Poland, Bulgaria, and Hungary intended to suppress liberalization. The resulting outcry is seen by many historians as the beginning of the end for the Soviet Union, but it took another 23 years to unfold. In the meantime, Havel continued to write, speak, and organize, and survive several terms as a political prisoner.

When Havel wrote *The Power of the Powerless*, he had no way of knowing what was to come. He'd been paying attention to both personal and public experience, all the ways that the heavy hand of the state attempted to foreclose freedom, imagination, and possibility, and he had to write about it.

The essay doesn't express much hope for formal types of political action: how much do elections matter when the state predetermines the outcome? But he wrote perceptively about the impact of actions that may not be explicitly political. For example, he pointed out that when Charter 77, a collective statement of opposition, appeared in 1977, the attention and enthusiasm that ensued were substantially driven by the arrest and trial of a rock group called “The Plastic People of the Universe,” which had been formed right after the invasion that ended Prague Spring. The band members (who took their name from a Frank Zappa song) were convicted of “organized disturbance of the peace” for performing at festivals, and sentenced to prison terms. Havel wrote:

Their trial was not a confrontation of two differing political forces or conceptions, but two differing conceptions of life. On the one hand, there was the sterile puritanism of the

post-totalitarian establishment and, on the other hand, unknown young people who wanted no more than to be able to live within the truth, to play the music they enjoyed, to sing songs that were relevant to their lives, and to live freely in dignity and partnership. These people had no past history of political activity. They were not highly motivated members of the opposition with political ambitions, nor were they former politicians expelled from the power structures. They had been given every opportunity to adapt to the status quo, to accept the principles of living within a lie and thus to enjoy life undisturbed by the authorities. Yet they decided on a different course.

Havel's descriptions in 1978 of what he called the "post-totalitarian state" were very different from how we might describe our own society. He started *The Power of the Powerless* with a tale of a greengrocer who government compels to hang a sign in his window saying "Workers of the world, unite!" He goes on to explore the totalizing bureaucracy that Czechs had by then internalized and the pointless acts they were used to performing to satisfy it. In this "post-totalitarian," order, it isn't necessary to point a machine-gun to compel people to conform, but the deterrents that punish nonconformance remain in place and continue to affect every aspect of life.

This is not the United States today, but there are shadows of similarity. Had he lived, Havel may have been surprised to learn the extent to which western democracies such as the U.S. and U.K. have become surveillance states. He may have been surprised at the degree to which self-censorship has taken hold, suppressing free speech without needing an armed apparatus to do it.

In the quote I just read, Havel mentioned two concepts that struck me powerfully and figured prominently into the visit I was expecting from **The Ghost of Cultural Politics Yet to Come: *living within a lie* and *living within the truth*.**

He explained that the price of survival within the post-totalitarian state was to *live within the lies* promulgated by the authorities, being careful what you say, read, do, and who you know, pretending that the state has legitimacy as by making the gestures that telegraph your willingness to obey without overt compulsion. Imagining the greengrocer had refused to post the sign, Havel writes,

The greengrocer has not committed a simple, individual offence, isolated in its own uniqueness, but something incomparably more serious. By breaking the rules of the game, he has disrupted the game as such. He has exposed it as a mere game. He has shattered the world of appearances, the fundamental pillar of the system. He has upset the power structure by tearing apart what holds it together. He has demonstrated that living a lie is living a lie. He has broken through the exalted facade of the system and exposed the real, base foundations of power. He has said that the emperor is naked. And because the emperor is in fact naked, something extremely dangerous has happened: by his action, the greengrocer has addressed the world. He has enabled everyone to peer behind the curtain. He has shown everyone that it is possible to live within the truth. Living within the lie can constitute the system only if it is universal. The principle must embrace and permeate everything. There are no terms whatsoever on

which it can coexist with living within the truth, and therefore everyone who steps out of line denies it in principle and threatens it in its entirety.

In contrast, living within the truth can affect the course of events in ways that have little to do with conventional politics. Talking about times such as Prague Spring, Havel describes them as the culmination of:

[A] long drama originally played out chiefly in the theatre of the spirit and the conscience of society. And that somewhere at the beginning of this drama, there were individuals who were willing to live within the truth, even when things were at their worst. These people had no access to real power, nor did they aspire to it. The sphere in which they were living the truth was not necessarily even that of political thought. They could equally have been poets, painters, musicians, or simply ordinary citizens who were able to maintain their human dignity. Today it is naturally difficult to pinpoint when and through which hidden, winding channel a certain action or attitude influenced a given milieu, and to trace the virus of truth as it slowly spread through the tissue of the life of lies, gradually causing it to disintegrate.

This really made me think. Every human being faces one choice over and over again: to settle into the groove of life, accepting existing conditions; or to regard your society as a collective creation for which you share responsibility, and invest time and energy in improving it.

Many people balance the two somehow, but others go whole hog. Some throw up their hands at the corruption and short-sightedness of those in charge of many institutions. They might decide to homestead off the grid, stay away from social media, protect themselves from contamination by a society they feel is doomed. They have a critique of society, but they see no hope of rescuing it.

Others dive right in. Consider the folks who attacked the Capitol on January 6th. Based on lies they'd been told, they felt themselves to be protecting liberty from a giant conspiracy that stole an election. They believed that by beating up guardians, breaking into a public building, and removing or defacing public property they were acting to change their society for the greater good, which many of them defined as white supremacy.

Both positions are extreme and illustrate the risk of believing your own propaganda instead of questioning your assumptions. My own choice is to balance the two. I have a deep mistrust of most existing institutions, but I want to be able to live in the world as it is, to experience its beauties and pleasures without my brain constantly telling me how messed up everything is, bathing every moment in fear. I also believe strongly in cultural citizenship, which isn't about passports and borders, but expresses our shared right and responsibility to have a say in the things done in our names and stand against the things that deprive people of human rights and well-being. I try to remember, as the great teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel often said, that "In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

For many years now, in exercising cultural citizenship, I have been guided by three questions:

Who are we as a people?

What do we stand for?

How do we want to be remembered?

Havel's account of the virus of truth slowly spreading through the tissue of the life of lies rang very true for me. I think that most people are better than the Trumpist ideologues who falsely claim to have our collective interests at heart. From what I've seen, there are many more acts of ordinary kindness than of exploitation and harm. More people stand for dignity and caring than for the callousness we've seen from many politicians. I doubt most of us want to be remembered as the planet's biggest punishers and polluters. It's only when we move to a higher level of abstraction—institutions instead of human beings—that indifference creeps in.

When **The Ghost of Cultural Politics Yet to Come** visited me, it wasn't to show me another petition or policy platform or piece of legislation. Instead, I was shown myself standing here today, asking you two questions:

- To what extent do the lives of community-based artists or designers play out amidst accepted ideas and practices that amount to living—whether consciously or not—within a lie not of our own making, a lie threaded through the fabric of our whole system?
- What would it be like to live within the truth?

The Ghost of Cultural Politics Yet to Come invited me to make a list of lies and truths as we live them. I'm going to share just four things from that list that directly impinge on the work of people at this conference. I don't mean to say these are the worst lies, just that they are some of the lies that affect us directly.

Lie #1: Ours is the best possible system, supporting the greatest good for the greatest number.

The truth: We are fortunate to have some courageous elected officials and public servants who are trying to make this real, but they are not the majority. Our existing institutions and policies are shaped to reflect the self-interest and shameful indifference of individuals whose economic and social power puts them out of touch with ordinary voters.

Thirty-one of the 50 richest members of Congress are Republicans. To give you an idea of their wealth, the net worth of the richest, Rick Scott of Florida, is about \$260 million; for the poorest of the 50, Rob Portman of Ohio, it's a bit less than \$11 million. (The numbers aren't all that different for the Democrats, but there are fewer of them.) Being rich doesn't automatically make you hard-hearted. Beyonce and Jay-Z's net worth is just short of \$2 billion, making them the richest living musicians, and their charitable donations—a small percentage of their wealth, but still amounting to millions—have gone to COVID relief, scholarships, historically Black colleges and universities, and a number of similar causes.

But being a rich policymaker carries an intrinsic moral hazard that is nearly impossible to escape. When politicians pass punitive social welfare programs; increase funding for the planet's biggest prison system and war machine while cutting schools, healthcare, and other basic social goods; refuse to adopt environmental standards to reduce climate crisis while giving more breaks to dirty energy; they are prescribing for others conditions to which they would not be willing to subject themselves or their families for any meaningful length of time.

As a public policy wonk, I frequently advocate for a Golden Rule principle. Policymakers should be required to send their kids to the poorest of public schools, use the public health system, live in the public housing their decisions have supported. Their quality would skyrocket overnight.

This almost always gets a laugh. People find it absurd to imagine a Cabinet member or Senator living in those circumstances because they have internalized certain ideas that animate our system. These are not principles any official institution claims for itself, but our system nevertheless lives by them:

- Privileged people have proved their merit by growing rich, and it would be rude to insult them by requiring them to endure reduced circumstances.
- People who fall through the cracks—lose their jobs, get evicted, live under a crushing burden of medical debt—are to blame for their suffering. It's not our problem, it's theirs.
- Poor people should be punished for their poverty by being given the minimum necessary to sustain life, nothing more. They should gratefully accept being monitored and surveilled to be sure they aren't cheating.
- Sure, the big guys cheat. Sure, Warren Buffet, Jeff Bezos, Michael Bloomberg, and Elon Musk paid no more than three percent of their income in taxes last year (Buffet paid the least, at 1/10 of one percent). But look at all the jobs they create! Give them a break!

There are plenty of reasons to want to turn these beliefs around, working for a system that prioritizes caring for life on Earth, treats all people as equally deserving of dignity and well-being, and invests in a future we want to inhabit. But I can't see it happening if most people live within the lie.

Lie #2: The United States can't afford to support culture as a social good.

The truth: In fiscal 2021, nearly half the discretionary U.S. budget went to the military: \$752 billion. The NEA budget for that year was \$167.5 million. Add in a one-time allocation of \$135 million as part of the COVID-driven American Rescue Plan. That \$305 million—far and away the most dollars the agency has ever been given—was less than one-thousandth of one percent of the military budget alone, and half as much as a percentage of the discretionary federal budget. I can't even measure what nano-percentage it is of the \$7 trillion in total federal spending. Let's just stipulate that the federal government spends one annual NEA budget every 3 3/4 seconds.

Consider other comparisons. Federal spending on incarceration alone amounted to nearly \$8 billion last year. (Total US incarceration spending, federal, state, and local, was \$81 billion.) Or just count direct subsidies to fossil fuel industries: nearly \$15 billion a year.

Who are we as a people? What do we stand for? Forget what is said, and look at what is done. Our actual priorities are punishing our own people and other countries and enriching those whose profits can never be high enough for them to stop wanting our money too—and getting it. That’s the truth.

Lie #3: Mainstream arts advocacy organizations are doing a great job.

The truth: At the turn of the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan was elected President, advocates decided they could win the funding game by shifting to a numbers-driven strategy stressing art’s secondary impacts. More than 40 years later it’s the same: charts and graphs about how many arts jobs are created, how being in the school band increases test scores and graduation rates, how people who buy theater tickets pay for parking, food, and drink as well, engaging the “multiplier effect.” The underlying idea is that you have to talk to politicians in their own language, which is presumed to be dollars, cents, and other numbers.

This has been remarkably unsuccessful, possibly because what passes for data doesn’t stand up to a reality-test. We can’t know if the parents of kids who stay in school put more value and pressure on things like band; how can we tell cause from effect? We can’t say that arts organizations create more or better jobs than other sectors, most of which make the same claims. We can’t even claim special impact of the multiplier effect, since folks who go to football games or karaoke bars also park, eat, and drink. These arguments fail because they are weak compared to the deep truths that beauty and meaning are necessary to human life and culture is what weaves a community from atomized individuals.

The real value of the National Endowment for the Arts’ budget has declined by more than half while this strategy has predominated. In 1988, the dollars were a tiny bit higher than 2021, \$167.7 million. This year’s budget would have to be more than \$400 million merely to equal the spending power of 1988.

Advocates don’t seem to be able to do simple math, as they evidently haven’t clocked this. Instead, every year they run the same campaigns and celebrate not seeing the budget cut further—or sometimes getting a few million more—as if it’s some great victory. It galled me that Bob Lynch, the head of Americans for the Arts, made nearly a million dollars a year in salary and benefits until he was forced out last year over questions of accountability, especially racial justice, while artists were typically asked to speak at their events without compensation. But tons of people went right on pretending this epic failure was a success.

Within NEA funding—about 50 cents per capita—30% of grants go to what they call small organizations (budgets under \$350,000/year); 35% to medium-sized organizations (up to \$1.75 million/year); and 35% to larger organizations. That refers to the number of grants, not their amounts. You can click on grant awards in any program and see that the grant amounts consistently rhyme with budget size; those who have the most get the most. If advocates broke down the dollars instead of the number of grants, that would expose the lie. What would their campaigns be like if they were grounded in truth?

Lie #4: With our wonderful private philanthropic system, foundation and donor resources are there for every project of merit, and competition only makes them better.

The truth: Both public and private funders support good and important work; they include good people trying to do the right thing. Some foundations are investing in racial justice. There's a new NEA Chair who has experience with community-based arts. But this is structural, not personal. Funding institutions live within our big lie about who and what is valued, about where our collective care goes.

The U.S. has the largest system of private philanthropy. It allows wealthy patrons to glorify their names and elevate their own judgment of worthiness while escaping taxes. Tax deductibility isn't what it once was, which is why those ultra-rich tax evaders I mentioned earlier aren't the biggest philanthropists: they have other ways to get out of paying their share. The IRS regulates foundations more for perpetuity than philanthropy: in return for their tax exemption, foundations must spend only five percent per year of the fair market value of their endowments on charitable contributions. Very few spend more, although that figure rises temporarily in emergencies such as Katrina or COVID. Even fewer spend down their capital. So when they say they can't afford to fund all the worthy proposals that come over the transom, they mean they can't afford to do it while growing their endowments in perpetuity.

Most of the few foundations supporting community-based arts work receive ten or more times the applications they fund. Their main job is turning people down. One result has been an escalation in arduousness of the application process, requiring more and more detailed plans and documentation, and also requiring promises that support the lies we live within. Even though community-based work is relational, fluid, emergent, and long-term, grantees are required to pledge that a short-term grant will yield measurable personal and social transformation. This system disadvantages those lacking professional fundraising staff. They spend hugely disproportionate time trying to raise money. If they are lucky, they'll receive enough funding to survive, but seldom to prosper.

I can't prove that these systems were intentionally created to remind us who has power and who doesn't, or to keep us too busy crunching numbers to notice what's really happening. But those are some of their effects, and that's the truth.

It's an affront to human dignity to live within such lies. It's exhausting.

What to do?

I'm not suggesting storming the barricades at the Capitol or the NEA or AFTA or the Council on Foundations, although things sometimes change when people speak out. What I am suggesting is that we all stay awake to the second question I asked earlier: What would it be like to live within the truth? To not say "uh-huh" when people repeat the lies I've listed and many others like

them, but instead to calmly say what is true? I can easily imagine important actions arising from asking this question. Maybe some folks will even feel the time is right for a new cultural democracy platform to remind us of who we are and hold people to account. Maybe some will have a new idea about how to pursue the truth.

There are signs of life. The New York-based CETA Legacy Project has been documenting that public service jobs program's impact on lives and communities, hoping to see something like it return. Two pieces of federal legislation to create small arts job programs have been sitting in committee since last May, sponsored by my member of Congress, Teresa Leger Fernandez. The WPA idea is evergreen, but it's not a Congressional priority. Private funders in New York have seized on it, with the Mellon Foundation pledging \$125 million over three years for "Creatives Rebuild," supporting New York state artists with jobs or a guaranteed annual income. But there's not much political will around supporting community artists in an ongoing way or making cultural development a public priority. Maybe some of you, living into the truth, will find new ways to change that.

Speaking for myself, I doubt I will be drafting more petitions or cultural policy platforms anytime soon. Instead, I am thinking of those lines from Vaclav Havel I shared earlier:

[T]here were individuals who were willing to live within the truth, even when things were at their worst. These people had no access to real power, nor did they aspire to it. The sphere in which they were living the truth was not necessarily even that of political thought. They could equally have been poets, painters, musicians, or simply ordinary citizens who were able to maintain their human dignity.

Right around the time **The Ghosts of Cultural Politics** took me on this journey, a friend asked where I found hope. I said it was in the long view, that the wheel of history always turns. But we can't know which way it will turn now, and if our aim is to live in truth, we have to face into not knowing.

I am worried that we are overlooking an emergent truth. For the last few decades it's been a core idea of neoliberalism that capitalism serves democracy, that the world is moving toward what Francis Fukuyama called "the end of history," in which all countries will embrace democratic norms. But recent history has shown us the opposite, a steady rise in authoritarianism in Russia, Hungary, Turkey, Syria, China, Venezuela, North Korea, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, both Congos, and on and on. Authoritarian elites in our own country are trying to destroy voting rights, change education into indoctrination, skew elections, derail efforts to address climate crisis, further militarize the police, and much more.

Resistance and opposition here are high. It would be foolish to predict that our homegrown authoritarians will prevail. We still have basic freedoms and the foundational instruments of democracy, and those can make all the difference—if we use them. Any way that resonates with you is worth engaging. I highly recommend a wonderful little book by Timothy Snyder called *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from The Twentieth Century*, which offers things everyone can do to remain awake, aware, and engaged in the project of protecting freedom, which is what I believe history now demands of us all. Whatever happens, the group of people here today, whose work

embodies cultural democracy and embraces community, can have a powerful influence by living within the truth.

I want to leave you with a few more words from Havel, this time from his book, *Disturbing The Peace*, based on a series of 1985-86 interviews he gave:

The more unpromising the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is. Hope is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. ... It is also this hope, above all, that gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.

In 1989, just a few years after he spoke these words of hope amidst hopelessness, the Velvet Revolution which Havel did so much to bring about made him President of Czechoslovakia.

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