

## “The Power of Art” . . . for better or worse

In 1999, CreativeTime brought together a volatile “think tank” composed of a dozen conceptual artists and selected biotech research scientists. Invited guests at the first dinner were asked to continue to meet, conceive and discuss ideas for grant proposals for public works designed to address the issues of genetic engineering and the cultural significance of the recently decoded human genome.

As perhaps the youngest and most naïve artist invited, I felt that I by no means merited a chair at this table of important and paradigmatic discourse. My wide-eyed optimism saw this summit of social-political artists and bio-tech scientists as a coalition between the very power brokers of techno-culture and contemporary art history. This soirée conjoining the Apollonian mind of the scientist and the Dionysian soul of the artist led me to believe that my social perspective could be considered equal to that of a leading genomic engineer. The proposed open dialog suggested that my artist’s voice, perspective and poetic portrayal of the genetic revolution was as important as the hard-science behind it, and that a truly visionary artist could help guide the course of research science and generate new discovery. I became drunk with the desire to wield the “POWER OF ART” myself and to spur progress of techno-culture at large.

However, the dominant tone of the artists at the table was hardly as optimistic: most were cautionary, cantankerous and critical of the oncoming genetic revolution. Their fear of bio-warfare, genetic determinism, and any pushing of the ethical envelope overpowered any sense that they may have had of wonder and awe of the historic threshold itself. Suspicion polarized the dialog and set the dinner on edge. Most of the artists present were opposed to the celebration of science and a progressive western ideology in any form. Perhaps this skepticism and distrust was a generational perspective belonging to the activist artists of the 60s, 70s and 80s, trained to react and fight at the first sight of the military industrial complex. Yet, ironically, these leftist anti-biotech artists were now preaching Luddite sermons not dissimilar to the anti stem-cell policies of our rightwing Administration.

I left that first dinner wondering why artists, when given the platform to speak publicly about powerful issues, more often than not used it to “speak out” in opposition? Are artists so insecure that they always feel oppressed or persecuted by forces more powerful than themselves? Or was it that history and contemporary culture had only lionized artists as radical bohemians, intellectual tricksters, and passionate rogues? Apparently, if an artist’s work wasn’t adversarial, it must be propaganda. At that table, an artist was required to have a “cause” and was expected to fight in the Revolution against the Establishment, like a member of the *Situationist International* or a the Weather Underground.

CreativeTime’s seductive invitation to join the freedom-fight and compete for one of the generous DNAids art grants left me with an ideological dilemma: clearly, if I wasn’t part of the solution, I was part of the problem but I couldn’t recognize what the problem was. So, I decided to sarcastically (and, if possible, ironically) celebrate the triumphs of genetic engineering as a mock bio-terrorist, and enlist as a double agent.

Certain that I had little hope of actually receiving one of the grants, I collaborated with Paul Myoda, a fellow artist, on a proposal for an implausible public sculpture that we titled *Bioluminescent Beacon*. The *Beacon* was to be a living luminous genetically-mutated single-celled cyborg-sculpture designed to replace the FCC beacon on top of the 1,300 foot radio mast of World Trade Center One. Our plan was to create an intervention in the orderly, plutocratic and Monolithic New York City night sky with a tiny blinking Tourettes-inflicted *meme*, symbolizing the individualist rogue voice of the artist as mad-scientist. Of course, this Frankensteinian project was far closer to science fiction than science, and we thought that our histrionic proposal alone would be the sum of our efforts. However, Creative Time gave us the benefit of the doubt and awarded us a grant to bring our monster to life.

Between 1999 and 2001, CreativeTime skillfully gained access for us into the genetics lab at the Museum of Natural History as well as consultation with biologists at the New York City Aquarium and, in 2001, recommended us for a studio residency on the 91<sup>st</sup> floor of the World Trade Center One, courtesy of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. These infiltrations galvanized my optimistic beliefs that the Power of Art as a subversive element could indeed have a profound impact upon the culture-at-large.

My ironic perspective came to an abrupt end on the morning of September 11, 2001, when our Trade Center colleagues operating the radio-mast, our Bio-Beacon project and our *soi-disant* absurdist roles as rogue artists slash mad scientists were obliterated. We felt shameful and useless, and lost. In those moments, it appeared obvious that nothing was more inconsequential and powerless than an artist in a time of deep crisis and tragedy.

However, on September 12<sup>th</sup>, Anne Pasternak of CreativeTime again asked us to join the relief effort and conceive an artist's rendering of hope for a forthcoming New York Times Magazine issue on the disaster. This was the only action that gave us any sense of purpose at the time and we were grateful to find a role, no matter how abstract and removed it was. For the Times, we conceived an image of the twin towers as phantom apparitions in light and presented this concept as a hypothetical and ephemeral memorial of sorts, a haunting and vigilant pair of beacons to serve as surrogate landmarks to fill the void in the New York City skyline. Unexpectedly, this image was selected for the cover of the Magazine and instantaneously struck a cord with the public. It mobilized the "Towers of Light Initiative" organized with Creative Time and the Municipal Arts Society. Campaigning to launch this public art light project was the only thing that gave us a sense of perseverance and resolve during that time of utter confusion, fear and uncertainty.

Six months after the collapse of the Trade Center, when the Towers of Light memorial was illuminated, it had a phenomenological effect on the City psyche that we could have never predicted. The Towers of Light appeared to embody the essential, empathetic Power of Art to both heal and rally the human spirit. The project took on a life and omniscience of its own: it became something far more public than public art and its authors -- it became an instantaneous icon, so far reaching that its image is recognized around the globe. The city had taken control of the project, it was no longer art it was a monument, and its image now belonged to every one and no one.

Nothing has been as empowering as or humbling for me than seeing the Towers of Light project come to fruition and succeed as it has. Once the project was embraced by the public and recognized as part of the cultural recovery effort, images of the Lights and their illusive meanings were adopted by everyone or arrogated by anyone who wanted their associative power. A graffiti memorial mural in Bushwick, depicting the Towers of Light made my day, as learning of the Pentagon's plans to bringing them to Kabul to boost troop moral, chilled by blood, yet I had no say over either use of the image.

Five years and three wars later, I remain perplexed as to whether public art has the power to spur progress or the course of history for the better. I wonder whether a public artwork is more powerful when conceived defensively, as an adversarial reaction to an oppressive power or when initiated offensively, as an act of self-empowerment and canonization. Although we may have believed the Towers of Light were launched as a defensive, situationist gesture against fear itself, the memorial has also been perceived as simple patriotic propaganda, sanctifying capitalism and fueling the engine of the western military industrial complex. Whichever the final interpretation may be, it was clear that once the project was aloft, this rogue artist has had little power over its perceived meaning. Although I will always be an ambitious optimist by nature, I have come to appreciate and share some of the cautionary and critical perspective of those more seasoned activist-artists from that Creative Time Think Tank where this story began. I now recognize, that for better or worse, the meaning and true "POWER OF ART" is as much wielded by the culture that beholds it as the artists who create it.

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