

THE ARTIST AS CITIZEN

1992 is landmark year.

We will commemorate the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America and we will elect a President.

It is a perfect time to ask what is your responsibility to participate in these events as an artist as and a citizen.

The commemoration is a process that will help to redefine America's past.

The election is a process that will help to define America's future.

As artists we need to participate creatively in both these events. We should apply our artistic talents toward interpreting and communicating the meaning of these events. I would encourage artists of all disciplines to inquire how these two national undertakings--the remembering of a voyage and its aftermath and the electing of a President--are rich with symbols and how these symbols affect our national imagination and how they affect the way we think of ourselves.

As Columbus left the safe harbors and known shores of Europe for the unknown terrain of America, it is time for artists and arts workers to make a similar voyage. It is time for artists to leave the security of their insular communities and enter the waters of political activism. It is time to act as citizen-artists.

It is especially vital that artists get involved in the upcoming elections. Regardless of whether you choose to devote artistic energy to interpreting the 1992 elections, you should become active in deciding the outcome of the 1992 elections.

Why should you do this?

You should get involved in the electoral process so you can help elect candidates who will support the arts, defend freedom of expression and work to pass budgets and legislation that will respect the pressing needs of people over the needs of an antiquated Cold War military agenda.

The arts, freedom of expression and basic human services in America are all under a potent and persistent attack by a combination of conditions: politicians and fundamentalist religious leaders who wish to cut all public funding for the arts, federal government interference into the lives of its citizens (for example, the so called "Gag Rule" which forbids health care workers in federally funded clinics to discuss abortion with their clients), and public budget priorities which ignore the development of human capital.

You must get involved because you have no choice.

If we artists and arts workers stand idly by while these trends inch us toward the 21st century, there will be no public (and precious little private) support for the arts in the new century.

If we do not fight to protect and champion the First Amendment, it will be whittled away one word at a time and you will not be able to freely practice your art in the new century.

If we do not demand that our government create policies and budgets which reflect our values, then we will continue the trend of the eighties in which wealth and opportunity is transferred from the lower and middle economic strata of our society to the richest, highest strata.

In this bleak scenario, the new century will be a place where artists are seen as criminals and the rich and privileged live apart from the economic and environmental blights wreaked by decades of governmental incompetence and venality.

So, as citizens we need to get involved now.

The most basic way to start being involved is to register to vote. You can become a Deputy Registrar and get others to vote. You can become involved in the campaigns of candidates who believe in what you believe in. You can become involved in the life of your community by participating in civic groups such as service clubs, PTAs and local school councils.

There have been many calls for artists and arts workers to get involved in the political process. Perhaps the most eloquent came from the ultimate arts activist, Vaclav Havel, the President of the Czechoslovak Republic--playwright and former dissident who spent a number of years in his country's jails for his words and work. He was addressing a Joint Session of the United States Congress when he said:

The salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility....If I subordinate my political behavior to this imperative mediated to me by my conscience, I can't go far wrong....

This is why I ultimately decided--after resisting for a long time--to accept the burden of political responsibility. I am not the first, nor will I be the last, intellectual to do this....If the hope of the world lies in human consciousness, then it is obvious that intellectuals cannot go on forever avoiding their share of responsibility for the world and hiding their distaste for politics under an alleged need to be independent....

When Thomas Jefferson wrote that "Governments are instituted among Men deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed," it was a simple and important act of the human spirit. What gave meaning to that act, however, was the fact that author backed it up with his life. It was not just the words, it was his deeds as well.

So, as we start the new year, I hope you will accept "the burden" of political involvement and embark on a voyage of discovery in the civic life of your community.

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Tom Tresser is a Chicago-based civic educator and public defender. In the early 1990's to the early 2000's, Tom crossed the country urging creative professionals to lead in public life and run for local office. This work is articulated in his manifesto, "America Needs You!" (<http://tinyurl.com/America-Need-You-Issuu>). Tom co-founded Protect Our Parks in 2008 to stop the privatization of Lincoln Park (www.wesavedlincolnpark.org), and in 2009 was a co-leader of the No Games Chicago campaign that derailed Chicago's bid for the 2016 Olympics (www.nogameschicago.com). In 2013 he opened the CivicLab in the West Loop as America's first co-working/maker space dedicated to civic engagement and social justice (www.civiclab.us). He is the organizer and publisher of "Chicago Is Not Broke. Funding the City We Deserve" (www.werenotbroke.org), and the Lead Organizer for the TIF Illumination Project (www.tifreports.com). His book on the No Games Chicago campaign will be published by Routledge Press in mid-2024 (www.nogameschicagobook.com).

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