

Foreword: Turning to Art to Organize the Chaos

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Admiration is the feeling that sustains democracy.

—Doris Sommer

To begin drafting this foreword, we met in a Zoom room and talked face-to-face for the first time in a long while. Michele had the notes from our earliest collaborations on creativity in the writing center. She pulled out one file folder. “2002,” she said. She held one page up to the screen, her laughter audible behind a photocopied image of a karaoke machine and a quote from Geoff Sirc. “Do you remember that?” she asked. Beth didn’t. So long we’ve been doing this work. Sometimes we are tired. Sometimes we feel like we are out of ideas. Sometimes the news gets us down. Sometimes we need to be inspired to do creative work. How are we going to do that? By admiring others.

In her book *The Work of Art in the World: Civic Agency and Public Humanities*, Sommer (2013) writes,

A much stronger feeling than tolerance, admiration is an aesthetic response of surprise and wonder . . . Merely to tolerate is to continue to count on one’s own opinions and simply wait until others stop talking. Tolerant citizens can feel themselves to be the real source of good judgment and imagine that the rights enjoyed by others apparently issue from one’s own generosity . . . Admiration shifts the balance of feeling; it favors others without sacrificing self-love. To admire one’s fellow (artist) is to anticipate original contributions and to listen attentively. (p. 31)

Sommer (2013) considers a number of cases, large and small, in which creative work initiates or supports institutional or bureaucratic innovation. She highlights “pleasure [as] a necessary dimension of sustainable social change” (p. 4) and identifies admiration as “the basic sentiment of citizenship” (p. 6) (in the participatory not the legal sense of that word). The book opens with a chapter on “Government-Sponsored Creativity,” and we might think this is an oxymoron until we read Sommer’s account of Bogota’s mayor Antanas Mockus and his “urban acupuncture.” They began in response to an off-the-cuff remark that Bogota was so far gone, it was time to send in the clowns. Mockus decided, well, that just might work. And it did. He brought in mimes to mock traffic violators. He supported a “Women’s Night Out” complete with “Safe Conduct Passes” that could be clipped

from newspapers for men who needed to venture out. He “[saw] the city as a huge classroom,” according to his deputy mayor (p. 19). During his term, traffic deaths fell, homicides plummeted, municipal income from taxes went up.

Not surprisingly, people wanted to know how to do what he did. How can we make this happen in our place? And Mockus would reply that there are no instructions, no straightforward steps: “*Cultura ciudadana* is not a recipe but an approach,” Sommer writes. “It combines the ludic with the legal and counts on analyses of local conditions” (2013, p. 24). The take-away: “[T]hink adaptively and creatively” (p. 24).

To be able to think adaptively and creatively is a privilege. Creative ways of knowing might be intuitive or learned, but to exercise these ways of knowing requires open-hearted audiences willing to receive your performance. Not everyone has this audience. But everyone needs this audience. So dancers, singers, painters, poets—stay brave. We admire you and what you give us. The everyday work of art in the world gives us hope that one day we can practice a “collective virtuosity” (Dabby, 2017). As “creative leaders” in the field of writing studies (Boquet & Eodice, 2008), we believe this volume offers amazing examples of embodied sites where dance spaces become writing places and writing spaces become activist artist studios become compositions become

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We began writing this foreword by talking about our past collaborations on the subject of creativity. We considered the ways the writer/artists in this collection make us think about where writing intervenes in the processes of making art and experiencing art, how they use art to force people to pay attention. We talked about the chapters and about how the world feels tightly wound and simultaneously unraveling right now, about how everyone we know is turning to art to organize the chaos. The talk got a little heavy. Then Michele mentioned that she used the read-aloud function on her computer to listen to one of the chapters. “Before we hang up,” she said, “I want to read the first two lines of this chapter in my robot voice.” So she did and we laughed, because it was funny.

References

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