

THE ARTS POLITIC

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THE ARTS POLITIC is a print-and-online magazine dedicated to solving problems at the intersection of arts and politics. Cultural policy, arts activism, political art, the creative economy—THE ARTS POLITIC creates a conversation amongst leaders, activists, and idea-makers along the pendulum of global civic responsibility. A forum for creative and political thinking, a stage for emerging art, and a platform for social change, THE ARTS POLITIC provides a space that is intelligent, that is visionary, that is thoughtful, that will *TAP* new ideas from the frontlines to get things done.

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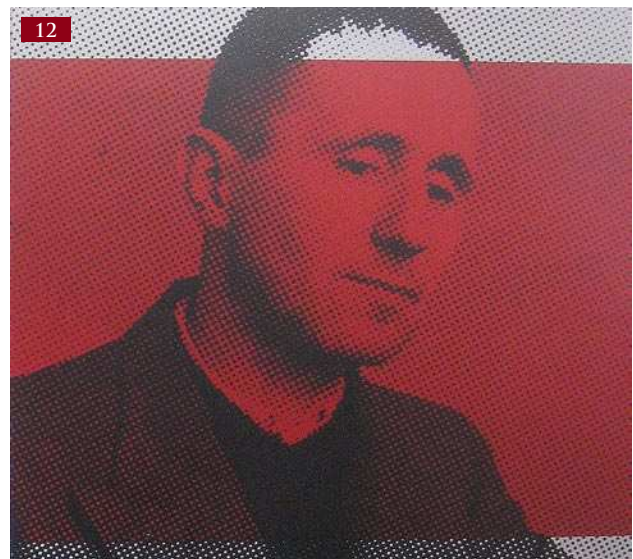
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QUESTIONING CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

by Brandon Woolf

I come to Berlin as so many of my countrymen have come before. Tonight, I speak to you not as a candidate for President, but as a citizen—a proud citizen of the United States, and a fellow citizen of the world. [...] People of the world—look at Berlin! [L]ook at Berlin, where a wall came down, a continent came together, and history proved that there is no challenge too great for a world that stands as one. [...] [H]istory reminds us that walls can be torn down. But the task is never easy. True partnership and true progress requires constant work and sustained sacrifice. They require sharing the burdens of development and diplomacy; of progress and peace.

— Barack Obama, *Speech in Berlin, Germany, July 24, 2008.*

Standing tall, donning a well-pressed navy blue suit with matching powder-blue tie and an air of confidence and humility that would help him to win the U.S. Presidential election in November 2008 (and the Nobel Peace Prize less than one year later), Barack Obama pledged to the world the dawn of a new era of diplomacy. Under the hot summer sun, Obama stood before booming crowds at the historic Brandenburger Tor in the center of Berlin and promised a new era of partnership, a new era of responsibility, a new era of mutual understanding, a new era of hope.

On November 5, 2008, just one day after Obama received the country's official endorsement, Alliance for the Arts—one of America's largest art's advocacy organizations—sent an email elaborating on (and celebrating) selected highlights from Obama's proposed "platform in support of the arts." One section of the "platform" enumerates Obama's call for the expanded promotion of "cultural diplomacy":

American artists, performers and thinkers—representing our values and ideals—can inspire people both at home and all over the world. Through efforts like that of the United States Information Agency, America's cultural leaders were deployed around the world during the Cold War as

artistic ambassadors and helped win the war of ideas by demonstrating to the world the promise of America. Artists can be utilized again to help us win the war of ideas against Islamic extremism. Unfortunately, our resources for cultural diplomacy are at their lowest level in a decade. Barack Obama and Joe Biden will work to reverse this trend and improve and expand public-private partnerships to expand cultural and arts exchanges throughout the world.¹

While there is little doubt that the Obama administration is more committed to the value of arts and culture than the previous White House incumbents (in which "platform" was an oxymoron), we nonetheless find conflicting rhetorics in the President's language. On the one hand, he seems committed to a tolerant, open-minded, cosmopolitan even, notion of partnership and mutual understanding; this is the rhetoric of the Berlin speech. On the other hand, we see the all-too-familiar, uni-directional language of the greatness, the rightness of American culture and a hawkish commitment to victory in the "war of ideas," which could (or should) be read as synonymous with the "war on terror."

The easy slippage in Obama's rhetoric is indicative, in many ways, of the complexity bound by the term "cultural diplomacy." We are compelled to ask: Is cultural diplomacy a marketing tool for a damaged American image abroad? After all, research released by the British Council in January 2008 showed that nearly two-thirds of Americans were worried about how the United States was—and is—perceived abroad.² Or: Is cultural diplomacy a tool for disseminating the varied lore of neoliberal ideology? Michael Kaiser, President of the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, recently issued a call-to-arms in the Huffington Post: "Given our reliance on private [arts] funding, Americans have a great deal to teach abroad."³ After all, what could America learn from those nations with long, distinguished traditions of government support for the arts? Or: Is cultural diplomacy—in a slightly more sinister light—a tool of American "soft power," as it was considered during the Cold War? Or: Is cultural diplomacy a strictly functional or transactional tool—veiled somehow by fuzzy invocations of "culture"—employed to achieve particular policy objectives. Or: Is cultural diplomacy, as recently conceived by the Executive Director of the Aspen Institute, a tool designed to engage "today's and tomorrow's leaders in the discussion and development of approaches, mechanisms, and actions that use culture as the keystone in effectively addressing and anticipating national, international, and human security concerns."⁴ Culture as/for security? Interesting.

During the first week of April 2009, I travelled to Berlin for a forum organized by the Institute for Cultural Diplomacy

entitled “The United States Meets Germany.” Founded in 1999, with headquarters in New York and Berlin, the ICD considers itself the “center of a global network of independent partners in both the public and private sectors, whose collective mission is to enhance the process of international and interregional human interaction by improving the very fabric of social relations.”⁵ And, or so the rhetoric goes, the mission is to “enhance” relations by means of culture. The April forum set out to explore how cultural diplomacy “can be employed to improve and strengthen the relationships between the countries involved,”⁶ in this case, as the title implies, between the U.S. and Germany. Note: “employed.” While I was—am—not convinced that ICD knows just what it means by “cultural diplomacy,” it was clear that ICD is interested in a functional, instrumentalist approach to culture; interested in utilizing culture as a tool for, as their brochure confirms, encouraging “understanding” and “agreement.”

I am as unsettled by this merely functional approach, which seems congruent with the slippages in Obama’s language. And yet, I wonder if we are obliged to completely abandon “cultural diplomacy.” Rather, I wonder how we might work to re-conceptualize it: How is this aura, this ideal of trust, of understanding, of humanity to be achieved? How, by means of culture—distinguished from the use of it—might a new form of “diplomacy” be actualized? How does the Obama administration hope (or does it?) to avoid the rhetoric of more traditional, hegemonic modes of top-down cultural imperialism; one that imposes American cultural products on others and asks—demands—they be accepted? How will the Obama administration move beyond the mere mounting of a production of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* by the American Embassy in Cairo in 2004 or sending the New York Philharmonic to North Korea just last year in order to “enable mutually beneficial cross-cultural exchanges”⁷? How will the Obama administration move beyond former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s remarks at the first and only White House Conference on Diplomacy and Culture in November 2000:

[I]t’s nonsense to talk of America imposing our culture. [...] One way we strive to achieve balance in our own policies is by integrating cultural diplomacy into our programs here at the Department of State. These programs enable us to make connections. [...] When we were represented abroad by the Jazz Ambassadors, [...] we provide an example of how our free nation has made something new and incomparable out of really diverse roots.⁸

In other words, how might the Obama administration conceive of a cultural diplomacy that values cultural exchange and reckons with its challenges?

A recent publication from the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy at Vanderbilt University explains that long-term efforts toward exchange and mutual understanding among nations is often beyond the short sights of diplomacy. Often, diplomacy is understood—and implemented—as a transactional relationship: I will give you x, and in return, you give me y. “Mutuality,” as the Curb Center report explains, “is not an easy sell. Governments tend to like transactional relationships best, because they have short-term goals and are easier to track.”⁹ Mutuality requires patience, dialogue, trust, bi-directional communication. Might we think, then, of the G-20 summit in Pittsburgh in September 2009 as a paradigmatic instantiation of a pervasive lack of patience for mutuality? What could be more “transactional,” more immediate, more efficient than a discussion—or power play?—between industrial and emerging-market countries on key issues related to the global economy?¹⁰

And then there was Michelle Obama: a solitary glimmer of light—of *hope*?—in steely Pittsburgh last autumn. While the President and 19 other leaders of the world’s economic powers met—transacted—in the city’s convention center, the First Lady toured the G-20 spouses through highlights of Pittsburgh’s art scene. We might raise our eyebrows here at the gendered (and other problematic) implications, at the “spousal” distraction while the real “men” do their real business across street. We might read this stroll through the Andy Warhol Museum and the Pittsburgh Creative and Performing Arts (middle and high) School as further trivializing creativity, culture, art in a world where the stability of the “international financial architecture”¹¹ takes precedence. But, we might also take to heart the sincerity with which Mrs. Obama is continually working to bring the arts into the public spotlight.

We might also take to heart the language of instability in Mrs. Obama’s prelude address to a joint concert by Sara Bareilles, Yo-Yo Ma, Trisha Yearwood, and students from the Creative and Performing Arts School: “Our artists challenge our assumptions in ways that many cannot and do not. They expand our understandings, and push us to view our world in new and very unexpected ways.”¹² We might take to heart her understanding that mutuality and exchange require understanding, acceptance, and a willingness to acknowledge difference as well. “It’s through this constant exchange—this process of taking and giving, this process of borrowing and creating—that we learn from each other and we inspire each



Is cultural diplomacy a marketing tool for a damaged American image abroad? Or, is cultural diplomacy a tool for disseminating the varied lore of neoliberal ideology?

other. It is a form of diplomacy in which we can all take part.¹³ We might take to heart her understanding of the arts as anything but transactional, as more than a functional tool. We might take to heart her understanding of the arts as essential to our re-thinking of (cultural) diplomacy.

Finally, as a strategic counterpoint—and possible source of inspiration—I would like to return to Europe for a final time to highlight another “institute” that works to explore the complex interrelation of culture and politics. The European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP)—<http://eipcp.net>—is working in dynamic and ambitious ways to “reorder today’s hegemonic cultural politics in a progressive manner, and do it on a European scale.”¹⁴ EIPCP is also interested in cultural diplomacy, albeit of a different kind. And while its focus is mainly the European Union, I think it has something to teach us, as Americans; something very different than a forum at the ICD. As Gerald Raunig, one of the founders of EIPCP, explains: “[T]he concept of *eipcp* is one that cancels out abrupt field demarcations, avoiding sequential models and temporarily opening up border spaces, in which different positions of artistic practice, political action and theory production can oscillate.”¹⁵ EIPCP is interested in forging a multi-national network of artists, intellectuals, policy makers, and those that span the space between. EIPCP is interested in the language of “instability,” in promoting “transversal practices” of cooperation between different modes of knowledge—art, theory, politics—in the interest of both critiquing and forging new “tools” of cultural policy. These “tools” are interdisciplinary, and not merely functional, in their constitution. They can take the form of art practice, theoretical investigation, policy recommendations, or those, which at their best, work to find a way to oscillate between all three potentialities. And so, I wonder if EIPCP can help us to expand upon the First Lady’s language of mutuality, of exchange, of understanding, as anything but contrary to challenged assumptions, instability, difference. I wonder if EIPCP can help us to think differently about what cultural diplomacy could (or should) entail, perhaps by means of continuing to articulate/expose/explore the productive possibilities of the very slippages that so often go unspoken. As Boris Buden, another founding member of EIPCP, concludes:

The insufficiency or shortage in question is at the same time both the object and the product of this hybrid activity: the shortage of the political that is produced in an artistic practice; the shortage of a cultural politics that art exposes and theory conceptualizes; the shortage of reflection that reflects itself in the political, and so forth.¹⁶

Send your ideas, replies and letters to letters@theartspolitic.com.