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GETTING REAL
THE ARTS IN POST-NEA AMERICA

PETER SELLARS



Getting Real



THE DOREEN B. TOWNSEND CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES was established at the University of California at Berkeley in 1987 in order to promote interdisciplinary studies in the humanities. Endowed by Doreen B. Townsend, the Center awards fellowships to advanced graduate students and untenured faculty on the Berkeley campus, and supports interdisciplinary working groups, discussion groups, and team-taught graduate seminars. It also sponsors symposia and conferences which strengthen research and teaching in the humanities and related social science fields. The Center is directed by Randolph Starn, Professor of History. Christina M. Gillis has been Associate Director of the Townsend Center since 1988.

GETTING REAL contains the text of the Avenali Lecture presented by Peter Sellars, director of opera, film, television, and drama. Peter Sellars visited Berkeley for the spring semester 1997, as visiting Avenali Chair in the Humanities. The Lecture, given on March 13, 1997, in Wheeler Auditorium on the Berkeley campus, was followed by a question and answer session, also reproduced here. The Avenali Professorship is made possible by the generous gift of Peter and Joan Avenali, who endowed the Avenali Chair in the Humanities in memory of family members. The Avenali Chair is attached to the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities at Berkeley, and is occupied by distinguished visiting scholars whose work is of interest to faculty and students in a range of humanistic fields.

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Preface

From the turn-out I think tonight's event, as the saying goes, hardly needs an introduction (except to say that Zellerbach Hall and the Oakland Coliseum were already booked). That being said, you know that I will give one (an introduction).

First of all, I want to welcome you on behalf of the Townsend Center and the Peter and Joan Avenali Chair in the Humanities. The Avenali Chair was endowed in memory of family members with no stipulations, except perhaps that I not call any special attention to the presence of Peter and Joan Avenali here tonight—with us as they often are. So I will not mention that. The point is that their gift has come without fanfare but with full confidence that the Avenali professors invited to visit the Berkeley campus each year will spark productive exchanges about the humanities for all of us.

To say that Peter Sellars is a director is a little like saying that Mozart wrote some music. Even if his interests and achievements could be listed on this program, they would have to include opera, musical performance, theater, film and television, western classics, repertory, new plays and music, performances from and in “all over the world.” Some billboard words wouldn't get it right either: brilliant, yes, but with generosity, warmth, and, sometimes, dark depths that the word can't touch; ebullient, yes, except that Peter and his work are both stretching and at the same time centered and, in a considered term I've heard him use and mean, “precise”; provocative, certainly, not for the sake of provocation alone, but committed to testing the powers of this world with the powers of art, and vice versa. Peter Sellars is an artist and a teacher, as, he would say, all artists *are*, in one way or another. He is a teacher who is an activist on the front lines of the real world. He is a professor, too, in the real sense of one who “professes” and, for all his modesty about this, is wonderfully learned.

Now, the best way to get all of this together is to let Peter speak, which I'll do in a moment. But let me try a few scenes from a script I'm prepared to offer him called "Peter Sellars Meets the Multiversity." I can swear that they are truer to life than Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*, who goes to Berkeley the wrong way on the Bay Bridge and ends up at UCLA. In the first scene Peter Sellars, brimming over with nearly three hours of ideas, meets last August with the vice chancellor and the Townsend director. The conversation lasts several times longer than any single previous conversation with university administrators and includes the first discussion of prison reform in California Hall. Scene Two: Peter leads his first class, "Art as Social Action," which, with characteristic Berkeley bureaucratic wit, has been scheduled in the Genetics and Plant Biology building, and at the same time with another class. Peter's class reassembles on the lawn in the first of its weekly four-hour long sessions, after which students spend another four hours recovering from the intellectual stimulation. As the course syllabus advises, "This course tends to be somewhat time consuming."

In another scene, on his academic panel discussing Natalie Davis's lectures on the reality of cultural mixtures—not the fantasy of cultural purity—in European history, Peter Sellars delivers a telling and sensitive review of Davis's recent book, *Women on the Margins*, draws on Sufi texts to argue that the ability to live in and understand different cultures is not inconsistent with deep and consistent belief, and asks the academic participants to be mindful of the real human suffering that stories of cross-cultural encounters may at the same time expose and gloss over. Scenes to come: a demonstration performance on April 1 by the greatest living exponent of Kunqu opera, Madame Hua Wenyi, and a discussion of the past, present and future of Kunqu by leading scholars and Peter Sellars, who has just returned from exploring the vestiges of this traditional opera in five Chinese cities; on April 9 a conversation between Peter Sellars and novelist Ivan Klima on "living in fiction and history"; and, of course, tonight's Avenali lecture with the "brilliant," "ebullient," and "provocative" title: "Get Real: The Arts as a Social Economic Force in Post-NEA America."

—Randolph Starn
Director
Townsend Center for the Humanities

Getting Real

The Arts in Post-NEA America

Peter Sellars

In my line of work truth is not arrived at by individuals sitting around saying what they think. Quite the opposite is true. Engagement, the discussion through sharing something in my life, is about going into a room with a bunch of other really interesting people and coming out with something more complex than any one of us would have imagined before we walked in. I assume the same thing tonight. So please, let's engage. I will say a series of irritating, indefensible things, and at some point people will respond to that.

Basically, in a friendly way, I want to talk about the current crisis. I'm not one of these people who just have to position everything as a crisis in order to talk about it, but I think it's not too far-fetched to suggest that the arts in America are in a rather crisis-oriented position. If we could just talk about Washington D.C. Everyone's favorite NEA chairman Jane [Alexander] testified today before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations, trying to keep the NEA budget at, I think, \$163 million, which is what Mr. Clinton asked for last year but did not get. He's therefore asking for it again this year. I think people noted what is referred to as a plug for the arts in his State of the Union speech. In Washington even the infinitely hostile Mr. Newt has responded in a friendly way to the arts this week.

On the other hand, the Republican majority in the House, a few months ago, did openly target the National Endowment as something to be removed in this current session. By the time I was supplying the title for this evening, I figured that “post-NEA America” was not unduly apocalyptic, but kind of just what it feels like. The NEA had its guts ripped out of it a couple of years ago and it’s still on certain artificial life support systems, but I don’t think it’s really going to come back. So the question is: is there a public place, a public voice, a public space, a public identity in America, or is everything about to be privatized on our way into the next century?

Artists, of course, are very satisfied with the artistic equivalent of the Reaganomics trickle down theory. They protest against Reagan, but in terms of the idea that “we’re making art for a small handful of elite people who will be very pleased as they appreciate our work.” Then somehow that will trickle down to the rest of society, and everyone will be happier for it. That seems to be accepted unquestioningly by a lot of artists, but I would suggest that it’s perhaps not enough. One of the reasons why someone like Jesse Helms can actually corner the debate on art, define its terms and, as soon as he’s defined those terms can, of course, win the debate, is because artists themselves have not formulated counter-terms in any way that has made an impact on the American public. I would *like* to blame the Satan of all Satans, Jesse Helms, but actually he has a sense for entertainment that so many artists lack. He has an ability to get space in the press, and also a sense of delicious outrage that is what the arts were supposed to be about. So, to my mind, Mr. Helms has won absolutely fair and square. The question is: do the artists want to roll over and play dead, or is a response going to be made?

There are several possibilities for the coming years. You could have what I think of as the Brezhnevization of the arts in America, where *Swan Lake* with the iron clad Plisetskaya will continue to be sponsored in the all-platinum version. This will be used as official culture the way they put those cement barriers in front of important office buildings to prevent suicide bombers from driving their trucks through. The idea is that you actually fund certain forms of culture because it is an impediment to thought and it discourages people from being creative. The Soviets have pioneered this and in China and Vietnam you can see the vestiges of it.

Obviously, though, in America we have our own form of major money being applied to mentally deadening activities.

I want to move on for one second to one interesting scenario. When Congress targeted the NEA, the message that was sent to artists in America was really simple: get a day job; there will be no such thing as a profession; art is something you do in your spare time. Now, for me, I would say this is not entirely a bad idea. I'd like to talk a little bit about that tonight because there are large stretches of the history of art where it's not a professional activity. During most of the history of theater, for example, people do other things with their lives and then happen to put on shows. The rise of the profession has not always been co-equalled with the rise of the standard of the art form. Music, of course, is a more complicated question. In a certain way this is because of the lifetime of commitment to technique that's required. So you need something to support you while you're learning. At the same time, when you look at the arts in many societies around the world, there's a very, very different attitude.

I was so interested in talking about Plisetskaya and the Bolshoi that I neglected to mention the actual art that was happening on a *samizdat* level. I do foresee this in America ten years from now. The way it was in Moscow in 1962: in Apartment Building Number 4 in the basement at 10 o'clock, and if the police have heard about it, then it won't happen, and you'll be contacted. We have the Internet; so if it's not going to happen we can get that out an hour before. But the question is whether real artists might just have to go completely underground in the same manner that we saw in the Brezhnev years.

In the 1990 L.A. Festival, which was based around the Pacific Rim cultures, we invited a lot of artists from around Asia: aboriginal dancers, the Korean shaman from Chindo Island, the King Island Inupiat, the Jemez Pueblo from New Mexico, a lot of extraordinary drummers, dancers and puppeteers from Japan. We had to convince the State Department that all of these people were world class artists because, as you know, the rather evil immigration laws that have been coming through the last group of years make it almost impossible to bring a distinguished person from abroad to this country. We had to convince the State Department to grant H1 visas, saying that these are some of the last artists in their

field keeping alive a tradition; these are world class performers. So, of course, when they made their visa applications, we got these furious calls from the State Department saying, “You told us these were important artists, and it turns out on their visas they’re all farmers.”

This connects to a story that I heard in Bali a few weeks ago from a great elderly dance teacher, one of the most respected teachers on the island, who has now trained three generations of dancers. He said, “A good artist is someone who understands the gestures in the dance, knows the music, and has mastered the technique. A very good artist is someone who understands the gestures in the dance, understands the music, has mastered the technique, has spiritual insight and understands the meaning. A great artist is someone who understands the gestures, understands the music, has mastered the technique, has spiritual insight, understands the meaning, and is a farmer.”

I think our task right now is to recover from some bad decades. For example, the normally progressive critic Sir Herbert Read announced a few decades back that art begins where function ends; that is to say, as soon as you’re certifiably non-functional, then that’s an art, and we will reward that. But all the people who are doing things that you can use, making pots, and so on, we’ll put that by the elevator in the museum near the drinking fountains, or in the stairwell, because women and other people made those things and they are deprioritized.

Obviously, in many cultures, that’s not the way it functions. The first step is the artist’s being part of a larger ecology. In an African village, culture is an artistic ecosystem. Your comb was carved by somebody who cares a lot about you. And in order to show you how much they care about you, they carved a beautiful comb for you. On the handle of the comb there’s a picture, a representation of your grandmother, so that every time you comb your hair, you remember that the person who made this comb loved you. You realize that your ancestor is present with you, watching you and supporting you in every moment of your life. Meanwhile, it’s a comb. All those things are happening. It is a total ecology. It is an ecology of meaning, of layers, of social engagement, that moves backwards and forwards in history, and it’s a comb.

I think one of our key tasks right now is to reimagine this art ecology separated from high capitalism, which is essentially commodifying everything, but

also reifying everything so that, for example, an artistic gesture now doesn't mean anything anymore. In theater, my line of work, presumably one of the things we're trying to do is to get people to feel something and cry. But it's AT&T who have perfected the ability to bring forth tears. In less than one minute you're in tears. "Oh, mama, the train station," and they've done it! There is no emotion that has not been used to sell products. So, therefore, all of it becomes totally suspect, and you say, "Wait a minute. What is this guy trying to do me?" Then you really have to process it in a completely different way. So, again, in the arts our task is to surprise people somehow into feeling something, to come around the back. But this idea of coming around the back or, shall we say, proceeding by indirection, is, of course, what the arts exist in this society to inculcate. The ideal preparation for democracy is not the awareness of how business works. Maybe there has to be something else in order to sustain a democracy: the idea of what it takes to cultivate a voice, the idea of what it takes not only to cultivate a voice, but multiple voices, the idea of what happens when you have multiple voices. Even Bach's solo music is about multiple voices. It's the presence of multiplicity within each one of us and how that's organized and how, in the course of a fugue, you end up somewhere that you couldn't have imagined because of all this participation. It's the participatory, engaged model.

I stage a lot of eighteenth century oratorios. In the eighteenth century, the idea of oratory was exactly the idea that democracy is only functional if people can share the things that they most deeply believe. But actually, most people, when they're sharing the things they most deeply believe, exaggerate horribly. So you have this embarrassing image of Clinton holding a paraplegic kid and saying, "Vote for me." The rings of insincerity are really offensive. What about dealing with a paraplegic kid? How do we connect to Raphael's painting "The Transfiguration" and the moment when Jesus goes up on the mountain and is present with Elijah? Raphael treats that, of course, through the moment before Jesus has had to encounter the kid foaming at the mouth and his parents don't know what to do about it. Raphael paints this healing of a socially disruptive situation and the transfigurations which are adjacent to each other in the Book of Luke in the same painting. You need one for the other. The concept is transfiguration. The idea is that the world isn't just what it looks like. It's there to be transformed, to be

transfigured. We transfigure things, and things are always in this state of transfiguration.

If I could just take Raphael as a good starting point to discuss real estate, because I know that the title of this talk is economics... Let's talk Florence, Italy. Let's talk a bunch of artists living there, working there, and let's talk about real estate values. It's now valuable property. The presence of artists raised the real estate value. Let's talk about one of my other favorite real estate bonanzas, Florence, Arizona. Have people been there? It's really very special. It's the maximum security prison capital of America. Prisons are the industry: the town industry. It's a town entirely devoted to prisons. There are seven of them. It's there where the famous "three strikes and you're out" people go. The prisons present a new level of specific cruelty that has been achieved by our yuppified society. People are put in a tiny cement box, entirely painted white, with nothing allowed on the walls, and no reading material for twenty-three and a half hours a day. There is no human contact permitted whatsoever; that is to say the food is distributed by a computerized dumb waiter. At the time when you have your half-hour exercise, the door opens automatically and you move down a bend in the corridor to the exercise room, which is all cement and completely empty. The ceiling is covered over, and it's twice the size of your cubicle. When you go back, the door shuts automatically. You literally do not see another human being. This is also happening at Pelican Bay here in California. The inmates of Pelican Bay sued the U.S. government for cruel and unusual punishment because, of course, they, like the child that Christ tried to heal and did heal, are going crazy. The deprivation of human contact is not, I think it's fair to say, rehabilitation.

Frankly, our task at this point in the arts is rehabilitation. One of the great things about being alive in America right now is there's no dearth of subject matter. There's plenty to work on. But the question is: what do people need, and how do you heal situations like that? How do you move in zones of violence? In L.A. we had a very intense example of that when a large section of the city erupted in flames over the course of three days and three nights. Some called it a riot. Some called it a rebellion. Some called it an insurrection. Some called it an uprising. George Bush, one of our recent Presidents (who came up with a phrase that I particularly admire, "the vision thing"), had a response, which was to announce

that “We will find whoever is responsible and they will be prosecuted to the utmost of the law.”

In the arts, of course, we’re trained with Antonin Artaud to be sensitive to social disruption and to the literal meaning of what we’re talking about when we say “gesture through the flame.” What is it when people are gesturing through the flames? What is it when a level of pain is such that people set fire to their own neighborhood? Are you reading the message? Or are you not? Do you know how to read the message in those flames? And, meanwhile, do you know how to treat the subject? The media did not, and for three days we had a spectacle of live television wires open all over America. Instead of any kind of teach-in about the issues of economic development and underdevelopment in South Central Los Angeles, we had three days of helicopters circling overhead with people going, “I don’t know, Pete, it looks like it’s on fire to me. I don’t know. I can’t tell. Oh, yeah, I guess it’s burning. It looks like it’s burning. Oh, Okay. Back to the studio.” It was a country that did not know how to read the flames, did not know how to read the gesture through the flames.

So one of our first tasks in the 1993 L.A. Festival was to respond to that gesture. We programmed the festival with a committee of artists drawn from all over the city, trying to say, “OK, how do we respond?” Since there was no response politically, since the media continued its course of predictable self-congratulation, there had to be some response. So a committee of artists met for a year and decided the themes of the 1993 festival would be home, place, and memory. What is your home? What do you think of as your home? Is it a place where you live? Or, in fact, is the place you live offensive to you and actually a betrayal of your idea of home? And, meanwhile, if you came from somewhere else, as most people in Los Angeles did, what is the role of memory, what memory of home are you carrying with you? Are you in some way maybe continuing to live it? Or indeed can you not live it because you’re a refugee? Of course, as soon as you begin to propose—and this is really shocking in the century of formalism—that art is actually about subject matter, the gates are open for people to collaborate. That is: an artist, a musician, a dancer, and a poet can all talk about those issues, which is different from announcing an evening of dance, an evening of music, an evening of visual arts. It actually creates. We’re out of our disciplinary boxes where

we've been sent for our infractions, and we're actually permitted to talk to each other once there is subject matter.

We've come through a long period where teaching art has had nothing to do with subject matter, it has entirely to do with a formal set of considerations. I think that's a crisis, and I think that's one reason why the artists are so inarticulate when they have to speak to the rest of the country about what they're doing and why they're doing it; because art schools didn't train them to do that.

In any case, we ended up setting this festival at the intersection of Crenshaw Boulevard, where the first fires were lit. Over a five-week period of the festival, a large number of the four hundred events were headquartered there. It was very interesting to try to convince people in Los Angeles who would never dream of even driving through that neighborhood, not only to drive, but to park their cars and get out. Of course, what they found was a beautiful neighborhood, a neighborhood just like their neighborhood. The difference was what was marked in that neighborhood was everything that was owned outside the neighborhood. It was marked because it was burnt down. But a year later, in a festival, we were able actually to create a situation where people living in Beverly Hills could drive to this part of the city and see something that was, in fact, educational: educational in the sense that they had a good time and that they said, "Oh, right, this is not the war zone that I've seen pictured on the evening news. This is actually a place where people are raising their children and trying to get on with life. In fact, you can do fabulous Christmas shopping there."

Now, that was a year-long process of getting permission to work in that neighborhood, because you don't just show up and say, "Hi, we're going to save you now," but the opposite. The fact is that working with neighborhood associations, with merchants associations, with police, was a year-long process of lots of stormy meetings, one on one, large groups, small groups, after work, during work, until gradually everybody had a reason to be at the table and to say, "Okay, we're inviting the rest of the city to come see our neighborhood."

When we first toured that area to begin thinking of putting a festival there, we noticed that there were no street lights. It was dark at night, and so probably a lot of people would be frightened to be there in the evening. So agenda item number one was to get street lights. There was garbage, and that's a

problem. We needed to get that cleaned up. And there was a park, but the fountain had never been turned on, and the plants were just dead.

In fact, it turned out there were street lights. The bulbs just hadn't been changed in ten years. There had been no regular garbage pickup, and the park had never been landscaped. As always, the media constantly presents people living in this neighborhood in such a way that the rest of America thinks they're asking for extra, they're asking for special consideration. No—they're asking for basic city services that were never there. What we could do as an arts festival was go to the L.A. City Council together with the neighborhood groups and say, "We're putting on an arts festival. The *New York Times* and *Time* magazine are going to show up. We need bulbs in the street lights. We need the fountain turned on. We need the garbage picked up, and we need landscaping." And because of an arts festival, that neighborhood got basic city services. People now go back and do their Christmas shopping. Now the *L.A. Times*, whenever it wants a comment about anything, goes to that neighborhood and interviews Richard at Dick's Jazz Café, because now it's on the media map. So that's what I'm talking about: the arts, as a social and economic player in the life of a city.

If I could just mention two more models around this question of memory. How do the arts contribute to memory? How is that actually a function?

I always remember going to the Soviet Union in the bad old days. One of the things that I remember from my fabulous experiences in Moscow was dodging my KGB Colonel host and spending an afternoon with a poet in Moscow who would take me to a certain neighborhood and say, "You see the third window to the left in that apartment? That's where this painter lives. This apartment building over there—that's where that poet lives." All these people had become non-people, who had been air-brushed out of books and out of photographs, yet the actual history was still alive with people in the neighborhood who knew who lived in what building. This invisible history is, I think, very typical of most of our cities, and certainly of Los Angeles. The formal history of Los Angeles has nothing to do with who lives there. It has to do with three families and the water rights deals and then Hollywood. There is this unmarked history.

Of course, a work of art—a painting, a song, a poem—is an act of commemoration. It's the people who didn't make it into the newspaper: like painting

right now in Zaire. You can't read in the paper in Kinshasa about all the people whom Mr. Mbutu just happens to rub off every time it looks like there's a democracy on the way. Somehow it just doesn't make it in. There are no photographs. Therefore painters would have to paint the massacre so that there will be a memory and there will be a record: the records that the media and that the powers that be choose to ignore for their reasons. So artists become actively engaged in the creation of alternative histories, and with the type of permanence that art has: the way a tune tends to live longer than lots of other things, the way poems are memorized and handed down on note paper, the way a memory lives, what it takes to keep something alive. That is, of course, the process of the arts.

So in the L.A. Festival, memory projects were one of our main things. You create a memory in a city about which Gertrude Stein accurately said, "there's no there there." Well, let's put some there there. So, for example, one memory project was created by a Salvadorian artist named Dagoberto Reyes. In the classic mode of a blind pig stumbling upon a truffle, I should emphasize that I became aware of the Salvadorian artists in Los Angeles through one spectacular gaff. This is why I'm always in support of giant mistakes, because I make them all the time. In this case, in the 1990 L.A. Festival, we invited Latin American poets to come to Los Angeles. We had a committee of people who read lots of poetry books, picked their favorites, and then we invited ten marvelous poets including, from El Salvador, a fellow named David Escobar Galindo, a lovely poet with very cultured works. In fact, he was the closest personal friend of Mr. Cristiani, and it was his signature that was on the evil false peace agreement. Indeed he was, in fact, the reason why Los Angeles has the largest population of Salvadorians outside of El Salvador. They can't live in their own country because of the death squads. So the fact that we were inviting the favorite poet of the death squads to come to Los Angeles was really not treated as a positive move within the El Salvadorian community. I arrived the day after an announcement in the newspaper that we were inviting David Escobar Galindo to find my office occupied by fifty angry Salvadorian artists, which is how I met the Salvadorian arts community in Los Angeles.

One of these artists, Dagoberto Reyes, then created a memory project for us in the next festival. He's a sculptor, but he had to leave El Salvador very rapidly. In fact, as his closest family members were killed, he escaped just with his life and

nothing else. Sculpture is rather difficult to drag over the Mexican border at night. So he arrived with nothing to show that he was an artist. He began a new life here working in factories. For thirteen years he could not make any significant art because he was working so hard. We hired him in the L.A. Festival to create a *bas-relief* that he entitled "Why We Emigrate." He made it over the course of a year, working three nights a week at the Salvadorian refugee center in the Pico Union district, which is probably the highest population density in North America: the highest crime rate, the highest murder rate, an intense drug economy because, of course, these immigrants from the Caribbean and from Central America can't get any other jobs, so they have to create their own economy. El Rescate is the main refugee center there. He was there three nights a week, and on those evenings people would bring photographs and mementos from their previous lives in El Salvador and bring objects of memory from their current life in the United States. Across six months they mounted rotating exhibits of these works, so the community could display to itself where it came from, its own mementos. People could compare notes on family members who were lost and on what this last period has meant for them. In the process he was absorbing that into his *bas-relief*. He created a *bas-relief* that was in two sections: one showing El Salvador with the death squads, open graves, people hanging from trees, prison cells, the families fleeing through the woods, and footprints everywhere. Then the center had a post representing the Mexican border with a woman climbing over the fence, and she was shot at the moment she was at the top of it. So it created a kind of crucifix with the impact of the bullet. Then on the other side of the fence was California, North America. The North American side showed, for example, a room full of kids watching a television because, of course, when they get here, because of La Migra, people are afraid to let their kids out on the street, much less go to school. So the kids are at home all day watching television. Another panel depicted factory work, showing the workers cleaning the machines because they're not allowed to work them. They can only get janitorial jobs. Another panel showed the traffic, the pollution. Another panel showed the field work, the migrant laborers and the lettuce pickers.

The difference between the Salvadorian and the North American side was that on the Salvadorian side there were these faces with very intense emotions of

what people were going through. On the American side you only saw the backs of people's heads, because once they're here, they're faceless. You don't know who they are. They don't know who they are. They're just someone you see across a street; blink and you might not even see them.

This *bas*-relief we got past the L.A. City Council—the crucifix was a problem. It is now installed permanently in MacArthur Park which is, of course, right in the center of the Pico Union area. It's the first permanent marker of the Salvadorian community in North America in the entire country. Installed underneath this sculpture is a time capsule filled with the exhibits of the six months at El Rescate. This is to be opened in a hundred years, so that their descendants will know one day why there are Salvadorians in North America: "Why we emigrate."

So it's a different model from an artist working alone in his studio and saying, "I am genius. The world must support me." It's a model of artists participating in ecology. We're moving on. As a sculptor, Dagoberto Reyes worked within the Salvadorian refugee center and his sculpture, by the end, represented a wide range of things including and beyond his personal vision.

I would just mention quickly the World Arts and Cultures program at UCLA: I work a lot with Judy Baca, who, of course, is one of the heroes of the L.A. mural movement. For their spring assignment last year, her class created the world of a neighborhood clinic in East L.A. The project was really moving and beautiful. And so it was a question of what was on those walls. It had to do with the pregnant women who were waiting in that room everyday. What types of thoughts did they have every day in that waiting room? What did that waiting room represent? It was about the engagement of the visual artists with that material and their response to it. They were working in a very collaborative way with people who used the room every day. I don't wish to understate how important solitude is from time to time in this life; I'm just trying to suggest that there is an arts ecology, that the arts can function not on the side or the way they're currently positioned as dessert, as something that's an extra, as something you can laugh off or something that you didn't really need. I'm actually trying to position the arts at the center of society and social and economic discussion. Unless you have certain types of engagement in your life, you'll never have them in your art. That is, I think, one of the biggest tasks now for us and we need to include that in our understanding of education.

Let me just emphasize that we're in a period of mass hysteria, where every dopey little thing that comes out of Washington creates this really divisive, angry, vicious, pseudo-public debate because the real issues are never debated. It's just these strange symbols like burning the flag. The media has concocted non-issues that can be talked about endlessly, the way graffiti is portrayed, for example. I know we're in a zero-tolerant zone here in Berkeley, but I obviously have a very high regard for graffiti. All of which is just to say, how do you remain calm through this period of hysteria and churning that we're in right now? I really do look to the artists and to the arts for a zone of calm that is actually benign in a period where there's an open public hostility that greets you on every topic.

I'd like to mention, if I could, the work of another group of artists, called Cornerstone Theater. This, again, is another very interesting model for me because it was founded by someone who was formerly my assistant at the Kennedy Center, working with the most famous actors in America, and the biggest budget, and my own "spectacular" productions—and he left. "That's not interesting," he said. Then together with a group of his college friends—and I just mention that because we are at a college—instead of sending out 8 x 10 glossies of themselves to get work, they wrote to the mayors of towns across America with populations under five hundred, and they said, "We will come and be your arts presence for four months if you'll put us up. We will work with members of our company and people in your town to create a show." They did this for seven years. All across this country. Ranging from *Hay Fever* in Marco, Texas, performed by migrant laborers—you've never heard Noel Coward until you've heard it with a Mexican accent—to *The Oresteia* on a Hopi reservation; to Molière's *Tartuffe*, spelled 'T-a-r-t-o-o-f' in Norcatour, Kansas; to *Hamlet* in South Dakota, where *Hamlet* was hotly debated in the pulpits of the town's two churches for "how dare this young man question the existence of God."

When they were in a small town in Wyoming, doing the *The Good Person of Szechwan*, people would say, "I won't say that line." Someone else would say, "Oh, I will." Gradually, across four months, every single line in the Brecht play was discussed and debated by every person in the town. So by the time the actual performance shows up, it's not the usual consumer product. It has a whole set of layered meanings, and when the final blackout occurs, people can actually say their story was told. A mirror was held up.

Cornerstone now works in Los Angeles, which they're treating as a series of small towns. For the last two years they've been primarily headquartered in Watts where high school students have a radius of ten blocks they're permitted to walk around in, and if you step over that, you'll be shot. So actually the containment nature of these small sectors of Watts becomes a really important place for theater to act as a zone of intervention. The zone of intervention, a demilitarized zone, which culture can provide in some way, is exemplified by the fact that in the 1990 L.A. Festival, which we announced on the first day of the Gulf War, central topics were Jewish and Arab art and the arts of the Diaspora. So to organize that festival took an enormous amount of care. The rule is don't surprise anyone. If you're going to have an evening of Palestinian and Jewish work on the same day at the same place, you'd better tell someone. Don't just spring it. What it means is lots of discussions with lots of people over a long period of time, since they're engaged in shaping the event. As soon as you permit that participation, then it turns out that the event is a lot more interesting that you would have made it. My favorite fascist empires on earth are in the arts. Artists are the least tolerant, most vicious individuals; they're the ones most anxious to kill another person's career because they're so angry that others got the grant and they didn't. Then there's the whole "who shall be first" mechanism, which is just maddening. Get over it. Live and let live.

In any case, what was interesting in planning this event was that we had the head of the Jewish National Congress in Los Angeles meeting with the head of the Arab Anti-Defamation League in Los Angeles. These two gentlemen had never met before, and there was a forty-five minute protocol meeting scheduled, which lasted for four hours. They exchanged phone numbers, and now they do events together all the time. The point is they would never have met except through culture, except through this other zone which permitted contact.

Democracy needs to be cultivated. It's not something that happens naturally. It's something you have to work on just like dance, just like music. A voice must be cultivated. How you use your voice in public, this question of oratory, this question of how you can connect to something that you actually deeply believe and share that with other people, to have a more just, a more humane society, is crucial, because basically none of us wants the situation that we're in now, which

is Florence, Arizona. This university is struggling for funds while \$13 billion are put aside for new prisons in the next five years. How did we get to that? Why can we not have an open and honest conversation about it? Surely it's common sense? How is it that in this polarized political environment that simple conversation can't happen?

Thomas Jefferson called it "declaring independence." What it means is that you stand up in public and you say "no" to something. You say, "We are independent of this." You express yourself elegantly, and that gives other people permission to reveal that they weren't for it either, that also in their hearts they have something else.

The key to the Declaration of Independence in eighteenth century aesthetics is the phrase "We hold these truths to be self-evident." You have to proceed from a place where both Palestinians and Jews would say, "Actually, that's true." What are the truths that we hold to be self-evident and that we don't have to make a special case for? I would, for example, ask you to check out the self-evident truths at Mark Morris's show this weekend.

What does it mean that the arts can show you something and it's not an essay in affirmative action, multiculturalism or anything else. It's just human beings being how they are, self-evidently. But you don't have to make this a federal case because it's actually just normal, how the world has always been. So it doesn't have to be politicized in a completely reified way, that actually creates out of an infinitely flexible situation this horrible frozen rigid moment of multiculturalism, which then becomes, through objectification, the enemy. How can we create a way in which we're talking about process? In which we're talking about this ongoing engagement? And how can we get past this poverty mentality? We keep saying, "There's not enough to go around. There's not enough to go around." How can we get to the fact that wherever there's a human being on this planet, there is abundance, there is creativity, there is everything you haven't seen yet because that's why they're on the earth, to produce it. Of course, you haven't seen what we're about to do. We're creative beings. The world we're about to make isn't here yet. We're here to make it. The actual presence of art in the world is an activist statement. If there's too much red on one side of a painting, Picasso doesn't call the editor of a newspaper or his mother and complain. He doesn't get de-

pressed and just sit down and do nothing for ten weeks. He picks up some blue paint and goes over and puts it where there's too much red. It's an activist thing. If there's a problem, solve it. If something needs to be done, do it. If you're looking for a job, find something that needs to happen and make it happen. In the process, you'll figure out how to get paid for it. But the first step is making yourself useful. It's really basic. Be a farmer at the same time as you're being an artist. Connect to people who have been under attack for a long time, who know what it means day to day.

There was a time when this country didn't just respond to the presence of lots of homeless people by building lots of new prisons to put them in. I'm referring, of course, to the Work Progress Administration, where for a moment in our history we took the fact that a lot of people were out of work, and we employed them. We employed them to build schools, libraries, post offices, roads, and bridges. We rebuilt the infrastructure of this country in the thirties. My personal attitude is that the only reason America could adopt a heroic posture in the 1940s was that finally in the 1930s it actually invested in itself. Those roads, those bridges, those libraries, and those post offices remain the most beautiful public spaces of our country's history. What it meant when you were just waiting to mail a letter and you're inspired by a beautiful work of art that places you and this post office in mythical surrounds, where you're thinking in large terms about your country and who you are, and where we're going—and that's just waiting in line at the post office! Beautiful public space is created by artists, of course, so your imagination is ignited every time you go to the post office. Compare any post office built since the Reagan administration. Just look at new post offices. Mean, ugly, small, cramped, depressing public space that collapses while you look at it, that is offensive to set foot in. The developer made a killing, and while you're waiting to mail a letter, you're just getting more and more angry about everything in your life.

If I could return to theater for a moment, or rather Greek theater where we're talking about music, dance, poetry. The Greeks, when they created this form of theater, were trying to prepare people for jury duty. That's why they made a form of theater that everyone in the society had to participate in. You didn't just watch it. As it went around, you were on stage with the chorus. It's a way of debating certain topics that were really difficult to talk about, like killing

your mother, what it meant that dad sacrificed his daughter to have a better career, or how you treated prisoners in the last war. These were not pleasant topics. How do they have to be discussed? They can't just be discussed with a sociological spreadsheet: incidents of matricide from July through to August in comparative years. Isn't there another form of insight that's required in order to make public policy or to go into a courtroom and decide what would be just? The Greeks thought there was and subsidized any citizen who couldn't afford to go. It was part of the national identity and part of a democratic process. How do you vote? Learning to vote was a cultivation of democracy. What does it mean to create this famous garden since we use the word 'culture' all the time. Culture does mean to cultivate, to let something grow, to understand that you can't look at it the way it is now. You have to keep watering it because it will change.

Let me tell you my favorite three rules for classical Chinese gardens of the Ming Dynasty. On the first section of the path you contract your range of vision. You are in close with little objects and enclosed spaces, and you can only see to get to the next place and not beyond. In the next section of the garden, as you pass through winding and indirect paths, you have to be willing to get lost. You have to be willing to let go of your ideas. You have to notice that you're not just going to get directly from here to there, but that in the process your ideas will change. The winding and indirect path: we're not just going to have the world the way we want to see it. This amazing, shocking thing happened where God created other human beings, and they have something to say. It's annoying, but there they are. And they're here to change your ideas. And, yes, there's the fact that you don't like them, and that you weren't even consulted. Not only do they not like you, they want to kill you, and you also have to live with them. The emblem of our age is one thing and one thing only: Nelson Mandela. You will take the people who for twenty-seven years tried to kill you and you will say, "Fine, let's form a government together." You will get over your enemy's rage. You will work with the very people you hate. Because until you do, no one is safe.

So you go through the passage of the winding and indirect path, and then there's the third step: you come out into a bright and spacious area. Then your vision is amplified. This path of a classical Chinese garden is, of course, the path of a democracy. You have to take an intricate path. You have to deal with micro

details and what it takes to do community organizing one-to-one. It's not a media event. Mass communication, in my view, is a contradiction in terms.

I'd like to conclude by saying briefly why I'm here at Berkeley. First of all, because of my beautiful students, whom I adore, and I'm thrilled to teach. It is a privilege and honor, and I'm learning much more than I'm teaching. But I was attracted to come here this spring for several reasons: the Townsend Center for the Humanities has in place things that I view as really positive, vanguard activities. It is a humanities center which contains a Human Rights program where issues of political justice, exile and refugee issues are discussed as humanities questions, not merely as politics. Here the humanities have a contribution to make towards understanding those realities which are usually reduced to "the news." How can we take the news and look back through the other end of the telescope and redeem it as history and as living people? That's a good path for the humanities in our period.

There's the ongoing program at the Townsend Center of discussions between physicians and humanities workers: that, in fact, the humanities have a role in how you die, in death and dying. Death is not just a technocratic, hyper-scientific activity. There are larger issues about death that perhaps the humanities are in a position to address in a way that the scientific community cannot. Maybe a collaboration is required to provide a certain type of sensitivity and awareness for what it is we're dealing with. Because what the arts obviously specialize in is that which is unknowable, which is, of course, where the arts can begin to suggest that ethics are important. The minute you get to something that's beyond your own personal point of view, you have to open yourself to larger ethical laws and questions. The universe isn't just random, there are ethical considerations. For if this life is about a human being's moral progress, then utilitarian concerns are second to ethical questions. Talking about that in the high capitalist state is not often permitted.

Then, of course, there are some very exciting educational models for me here. Principally I would just cite June Jordan's *Poetry for the People*, where poetry, which, of course, is usually imagined as a solitary event, is positioned as an active engagement within concentric communities. Here the students not only read

poetry, not only learn to write poetry, but have to organize poetry readings all over the Bay Area. Part of their grade is awarded according to how many people come. So they have to learn how to fax radio stations. They have to learn how to get an audience.

June Jordan's *Poetry for the People* class, which lasts the entire year, is at Berkeley High School on Tuesdays, and on Wednesday nights at Glide Memorial Church. It has students out there actively engaging, actively using poetry as a way not just to get a job, but to make contact, and meanwhile to learn that if you're going to be a poet, you've got to learn how to talk to people. You've got to learn how to get an audience and how to engage with that audience. The class is very inspiring because it doesn't just turn out people who know how to put words on a page beautifully. It turns out people who know how to speak out for themselves, how to use their voice, articulate their situation, and advance a public discussion. Poetry is understood as a contribution to the public discussion of the kind of nation we want to have.

Finally, if I could just put forward for you tonight a hope that I would have for the arts as a social and economic force in post-NEA America in the next century: how we're training young artists. The presence of the arts at a university is tremendously important, and I think, as Vice Chancellor Carol Christ has said, that probably in the next century the university will be the last patron of the arts in this society. We need to prepare for that.

I'm very pleased that the arts will have a presence in something that is not a conservatory. A conservatory has a limited technical function, and that is not enough to keep an artist alive. Right now the arts need to find their place in universities, in a broader discussion, across cultures, across disciplines. This is our task for the next generation of artists. What I would like to see is a type of program that is project-based, where a group of significant artists are brought together on campus to work on a project with a given subject matter. Say that subject matter is, as has come up earlier, prison reform. Right now, you can't read in the *New York Times* or *Time* magazine anything particularly informative about alternative approaches to prisons, and meanwhile the public keeps voting and voting and voting for the only thing they're told about. So I would like this program to

gather not only a group of artists to create work on this topic, but actually to invite a group of scholars and activists to be in residence at the same time and the same place to engage with the artists every day and encourage accountability on both sides. People who are engaged in public policy need to be asked to take six months out of their lives to begin to reflect on issues they're working on as they're understood in the humanities, to suggest that maybe the humanities have something to contribute to a sociological or political or legal formulation. They also have to be there to help a lot of the people who are in the trenches to recover from burn-out. Give the artists real subject matter, something to talk about, something that demands action, subtlety and really profound strategic thinking.

I'd like to create a program that attracts students to engage with that process. During the course of creating the piece, the students are also engaged with the scholars and the social activists in creating high school curriculums and community intervention programs.

At the end of the one-year process, when we unveil the work, there is a miniature L.A. Festival that consists of poetry, dance, film, etc., around the topic. This says lots of people are thinking about this topic now, and here are a range of the points of view. At the same time, the university hosts a major national conference where the leading thinkers on prison reform are all here for four days, so that the response to the show, as it were, is not just "I didn't like the costumes in the second act," but a slightly larger issue presented against subject matter that is able to be foregrounded in the arts again. Meanwhile, *Time* magazine and the *New York Times* can actually publish six pages on prison reform because they can send a few people and get a real story. And the university and the arts are contributing to focusing the national discussion on the issues that have to be discussed, just as they did in Greece.

The second year of the program the students would tour with the work across the country, doing the high school curriculum and the community intervention programs in the cities. That to me is what it might take to prepare an artist to be alive and functional in our country.

I don't want to give the impression that any of the things that any of us are doing are easy. I'm assuming that I'm in a room of working artists and working people and working scholars who know that everything that any of us has

done is really hard and up against a lot of opposition. That's why we're still alive. I hope that we don't have to show our medals to each other. I hope that we can just get to work.

We're talking about renewal. We're talking about social renewal. We're talking about spiritual renewal. We're talking about renewing people's energies in an entire period. My own hope would be that instead of setting the year 2000 with all this apocalyptic art, we will remember that the year 2000 is about the fact that birth is miraculous.

Open Discussion

Sellars: I'm really happy to take interventions and really get down.

Audience Question: You said you were going to be irritating, but you weren't, you made us comfortable. But your work is different—you romanticize and idealize crime, etc. How does that kind of activity comport with the kinds of hopes and words we've heard tonight?

Sellars: Well, again, I do feel at one level that one does the work in order to generate a discussion, you know, not to conclude a discussion. So the fact that people leave those works having a lot to talk about is very, very important to me. And, in fact, this is our task. I do deliberately create a set of things that are not only open ended, but in many cases mutually contradictory, so that they do create a set of tensions that are unresolved by the audience as of final curtain. My hope and my serious task is to try and create something that does stay in the mind, whether irritatingly or not is not important to me because, obviously, it is what you make of it, rather than what I made of it, that is important. And, in fact, across years one changes one's point of view about things. I think probably if you saw some of the pieces again, those to which you allude, you'd have a different take on them. *The Death of Klinghoffer*, for example. Showing it during the Gulf War created a very politicized atmosphere that we didn't exactly plan, but this is how it was received. People were looking for certain things, and it was received in a

certain way. But I think when we present it in another few years, people will see that piece very differently.

And *Nixon in China*, for example. I think one has to engage continuously. *Nixon in China*'s a very tricky work, like most works, because tone is so important. So people have read it in lots of ways when we weren't explicit about certain things. But I would like to think that if people live with it more, they'll see that there are several more layers involved, and things aren't quite that cut and dried. I don't find *Don Giovanni* a romantic work or a glamorizing of anything. It's just the most terrifying piece of music ever written, and so I think it's about as devastating as one can get. And, in terms of human sympathy and insight, Mozart usually takes the cake, and I think *that* opera's not an exception. The reason I brought Mozart into the discussion was that to me the discussion did require certain of the gifts that Mozart had which I didn't find in that discussion.

I'm always interested in doing classic works, not just to take their measure, but in order to invite them to take our measure. And if we don't measure up, that's very interesting. I'm not wishing to reduce Mozart's work. I'm perfectly interested in the fact that when I hold Mozart up against Europe in the '90s and the '80s, certain things don't match up. That's very interesting. I think that we can learn from that. So it's not my attempt to make a reduction; it's the opposite. It's moving two directions in time and space rather than one. At the same time, I do feel, you know, there's no better statement of the Mandela necessity of our period—that we, like Nelson Mandela, at times have to work with the enemy in order to see beyond it, overcome it—than this, perhaps, an opera that for years everybody said is hopelessly undramatic suddenly appreciated for what it is. Because, of course, Act One I'm now prepared to stage. It ends with people setting the city on fire. I think I recognize that. All right? Act Two, Titus, instead of saying—well, he does say: “let's round up the people who are responsible for this”—they're brought before him, and he says, “I forgive you. Let's make a society together.” For two hundred years the word on that piece is it's hopelessly undramatic and how could Mozart have written it? And, of course, in light of our current history, it becomes one of the most important utterances in the history of Western music, and a work of overwhelming power. What's interesting about

these works is that we can refract on them in lots of ways, and I'm really inviting people to do that rather than reduce something to a kind of one for one.

Audience Question: I have a good idea about what Mozart's doing, but when it comes to what *you're* doing, you seem to want to disappear, and stress the meaning of that to the audience. Even in the university, though, there's one person who doesn't have the right to claim the death of the author, and that's the Author. Yet that seems to be what you're trying to do.

Sellars: It's a long tradition. I'm joined by Samuel Beckett every day.

Audience Question: It may be true that the university is the last patron left for high art in this country, but the university's been a patron of the arts now for about half a century, and I would say that it's the worst patron the arts have ever had. If the university now could turn around and perhaps, under your guidance and leadership, do the very opposite of what it's been doing for the last fifty years, that would be wonderful.

Sellars: If I could just take the first question for a second—as an author I do disappear, of course, because of my cast. What's interesting is not my ideas, but the range of ideas that are in the room. And what you're seeing is not just unilaterally something I've thought of, but is actually the result of a series of discussions across a period of time with a group of people. And that's rather interesting for me, and I prefer that to a kind of basic, flat notion of authorship, because I think this question of authorship is already a complicated one, even in the case of Mozart. I think most artists necessarily cover their tracks during their lifetime, and I think that's one of the reasons why I can, for example, never trust composers' letters, etc., because, you know, they're always making a special case about something and covering something else up. So I would take those pronouncements with all the salt you can take out of your eye, or whatever that metaphor should be. [laughs]

Audience Question: What is the role of art in education? Can it play a central role? And what kind of art can play this role? You seem to leave non-filmic visual arts out of the picture, or reduce the role of art in culture, if I understand you.

Sellars: Thank you for asking that. I emphasize that there are so many models now that I would really like to move forward within an educational context. I tried to talk about that and the way the sculptor Dagoberto Reyes worked within the refugee center in South Central LA, and that his sculpture, by the end, represented the a participatory process, a community or artists' ecology including and beyond his personal vision.

But the other thing I would just mention quickly is the World Arts and Cultures program at UCLA, Judy Baca, who, of course, is one of the heroes of the L.A. mural movement. One of the things her class does, you know, for their spring assignment, which is both moving and beautiful, is create the world of a neighborhood clinic in East L.A. And so it becomes a question of what was on those walls. What did patients interact with, think about? It has to do with image, you know, what types of images did they have every day in that waiting room. What did that waiting room represent? There is an engagement of the visual artists with that material and their response to it, again, working in a very collaborative way with people who use the room every day.

So I don't mean in any way to leave the visual arts out, nor do I wish to understate things from time to time. Don't get me wrong. I'm just trying to suggest that arts can function not on the side, you know, or the way they're currently positioned as dessert, as something that's an extra, as I mentioned earlier, something you can laugh off or something that you don't really need. I'm actually trying to position the arts at the center of society and social and economic discussion. I'm not denying that other types of art could be made and even could be made by artists who are still engaged in those things. I think Baca's class is an example of artists exploring an isolated situation, creating very powerful work as a response to the different types of engagements possible. My point of view is that if you don't have certain types of engagement in life, you'll never have them in your art. And that, I think, is one of the biggest tasks, to include that in education.

Audience Question: Your talk didn't really give us a sense of what we as artists less established than yourself *should* do. I'm sure you understand that it is much easier for you to talk about the life of an artist-slash-farmer than for any of us to live it.

Sellers: Well, if I didn't offer concrete suggestions, the things that I would suggest may be more helpful, and you'll forgive me, perhaps? I'm sorry if I gave you the impression, and I'm sorry if I leave the impression, that any of the things that I suggest are the only way to go. I'm assuming that I'm in a room full of working artists and working people and working scholars that know that *everything* that any of us has done is really hard and up against a lot of opposition, and that's why we're still here. And I hope that we don't have to show that to each other. I hope that we can just get to work.

Opera and theatre director, teacher, and activist **PETER SELLARS** held the Avenali Professorship at the Townsend Center for the Humanities for the spring term, 1997. In addition to delivering the Avenali Lecture and organizing other events, he taught two courses: “Art as Social Action,” and “Invisible World,” the latter posited upon the notion that “art should render the intangible so that people can feel deeply its power and presence.” In an earlier visit to Berkeley, in 1995, Peter Sellars directed at the Zellerbach Playhouse the June Jordan/John Adams work, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, which was later produced in Montreal, at Lincoln Center, New York, and at the Edinburgh Festival.

Educated at Harvard, Peter Sellars has taught at the Julliard School and Georgetown University. More recently, he has held numerous visiting professorships in the World Arts and Cultures Program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Among his many honors and awards, Peter Sellars held a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for the period 1983-88.

