

14 RESPONSES TO THE CONVERGENCE *a sampling of engagement and representation*

Margo Baum, N.O. Not in Our Name, New Orleans, LA

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I am coming to the convergence for three main reasons. One, I am an activist and I want to both teach and learn among other activists, artists, and educators. Two, I am a New Orleanian and am always thrilled to have something so progressive in town. I wouldn't miss it. Three, the energy that seems to be built up from people across the country is exciting and a bit mysterious--since I am not 100% sure what to expect of the convergence. The energy and mystery have left me quite anxious for the weekend to arrive.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

How do we wake people up who are different than us--who don't think about speaking out? How do we reach non-activists, non-artists, non-educators to play a part in their community and their country, i.e. vote, participate in school board, etc. How do we NOT preach to the choir? How do we approach strangers in these days where people just want to keep to themselves?

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

Getting the vote out in 2004.

HL Brummer, public high school teacher, L.W. Higgins High School, Marrero, LA

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I got an email. I signed up. As I began to think more about what this convergence could mean, I really got excited. Nearly everyday in the classroom, I tell my students, "Today we must learn so that tomorrow you can change the world." What the change means is somewhat elusive to me. I think vaguely of issues--health care, housing, equal opportunities, etc. I dream vaguely a society where money does not reign. What I hope to gain from this convergence is clarity. I want to see what the framers and visionaries of a new world see. I want to piece together a collage of hope, one that I can present to my children. When I tell them they need to change the world, I want to give them an image too.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

How can we enlist our teenagers' help in creating social change?

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

How can we get more artistic and activist teachers?

Yael Flushberg, Sol y Soul and DC Poets Against the War, Washington, DC

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

To feel part of a broader movement of artists, educators and activists; to learn how we might all start acting like more of a movement; to enjoy seeing old friends and meeting new ones

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

What has been your area of richest learning? How can we become a nation of inspired and curious learners?

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

Balanced action: how to not veer toward the hysterical -- how to take care of ourselves and others in the broader mvmt (using our art -- healing, visual, literary, performance, etc.) -- and yet how to "get things done" and bring more people to the table of planning and decision making

Jack Herranen, Festive Revolution, Knoxville, TN

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I am coming to this convergence to assist in fostering these incredibly important links that, I feel, can help to galvanize/enliven/ignite the movement for social and economic justice here in the U.S. It is important to me because I am a father of a two year old boy, the husband of a Bolivian artist who is also a survivor of "La Guerra Sucia"(The Dirty Wars), and I am a U.S. citizen/nonviolent cultural revolutionary committed to the reclamation of democracy. I hope to leave with a clearer idea of how i can best cultivate these links between artists, educators, and organizers, and I also hope to leave with new comrades/colleagues/friends.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

How do we move towards a place where we frame ALL of the work(art-making, educating/learning, organizing) as interwoven pieces of a hemispheric civil rights/global human rights struggle, while sowing solidarity, and effectively countering Empire while deep in the belly of it?

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

Globalization. Or rather, top-down, corporate driven globalization. After attending the FTAA protests in Miami, it became painfully apparent that the field of engagement(with the power elite/the military/political/economic behemoth) has altered drastically and the longer we work solely within our own spheres, the more we become complicit in the atrocities of U.S. economic/military policy; how to REALLY pick back up the baton that has laid there silently upon that balcony in Memphis and organize a massive poor people's march on Washington, and

establish permanent encampments of popular education and nonviolent creative resistance/cultural revolution.

Greg Howard, Director Appalshop, Whitesburg, Kentucky

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

One reason I'm coming is the opportunity to think through questions with a group of people who have a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. I am looking for new ways that art, education and organizing can come together or inform each other. Having tried it in some informal as well as very structured/intentional settings (e.g. we are currently trying to combine art, education and organizing in Kentucky to bring about changes to our tax structure) it seems to me that it isn't easy to do it well/effectively.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

How/Can we sync up (or maybe some other verb) these perspectives and approaches in new ways? What would that take? Why/Is this important?

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

I think the most burning goal I have right now is some version of Contemplation Question #4. How do we use our talents and resources to articulate better social choices (or something like that) and the paths to get there? What additional talents and resources do we need? How does this coming together/negotiation occur? What have we learned through past experience, both via formal funded partnerships like ADI

Selma Jackson, 4W Circle, Brooklyn, NY

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

When we left Flint, I realized that the question of education has been an issue for me for a very long time. I had considered becoming a teacher when I was a junior in college, but did not actually pursue teaching until twenty years later. I lasted two years not because of the students, but because the system is not designed to teach and I didn't know how to attack it to make change. So I left and approached it from other avenues. Something has to be done about education in this country and as a grandmother of three pre-schoolers I want to know that I made it possible for them to get an education--especially my grandson. I hope to leave with tools to begin the journey to make a difference. I am working with a coalition in Fort Greene/Clinton Hill that have education as an agenda item and we are looking for ways to strengthen our initiative. I would like to bring back a plan that we can start to implement in our community.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

Despite our different approaches and perspectives can we develop a plan that we all can work with that is about change, development and growth of all people, especially the underclass and the marginalized.

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

Educational reform that recognizes that all children are capable of learning and what are the educational methods that can create a learning environment no matter where the school is located. In developing a more educated society and community, awakening community pride and investment in neighborhoods would be a goal I would want to come away with from this convergence.

James Kass, YouthSpeaks, Oakland, CA

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I am coming because it's crucial that we network with other artists, activists and educators who are working with the next generation of artist, activist, and educators and who start from the idea that art, education, and activism does not exist in a vacuum. Conceptually, this is key for me to see and know what's going on and by whom. Practically, I am also going because Youth Speaks is actively desiring to transform Brave New Voices - our annual National Youth Poetry Slam Festival that takes place in a different part of the country each April into a space where young poets and spoken word artists can converge with educators, youth activists, youth advocates, and youth-based organizations from around the country so as to understand how their work fits into the larger cultural dialogue and how it can be more socially relevant, invite more true cultural participation, and help to move toward ideas of justice. I've been a part of a number of national hip hop activism and hip hop aesthetic conferences over the last few years, and noticed that there is a HUGE divergence between the activist and artist sides. I don't think there should be, and I think if there continues to be, we are going to fall into the same problems that befell our predecessors. I also believe in arts education and believe in the nonprofit model, both of which are critical components of movements toward social justice and I think Youth Speaks has created some new models and methodologies that are important to share. I also am coming because I've never been to New Orleans and I'm trying to eat at least one po' boy sandwich.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own??

I'm very interested in how we, as a generation of new artists, activists, and educators, can continue to build strong and stable organizations and networks. I think this is key how do we remain stable, remain around for the long-term, but stay cutting-edge, stay true to our cultural aesthetics, creating new models and not falling into the dysfunctional footsteps that are waiting for us to mess up. and how do we do this all while continuing to maintain progressive values and support progressive movements? and earn livings so that we personally aren't struggling to pay bills and own property and raise our children. I want us to reach our visions, and work toward creating spaces that allow youth and justice to thrive.

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

As mentioned earlier, I'm really interested in expanding the Brave New Voices network and festival so as to move it beyond solely poetry (although the performed literary arts will remain the primary focus. So, I'm interested in seeing if anyone else is interested in expanding this vision. I'm also curious as to what other folks are doing that I'm not aware about I'm definitely interested in working with New World Theater, especially since we share so many artists and a desire to expand art and art spaces so as to more properly reflect the changing demographics of the United States.

I appreciate how this convergence, as you put it, has come together very organically and not top down. I wish Youth Speaks were part of the planning. A goal continues to be to position Youth Speaks so as to be at future planning tables such as this one for projects that aren't generated by us necessarily.

A concern is how do we keep doing this work? How do we make sure it's sustainable? Effective? That it moves into the classroom but also beyond it. Moves into the theaters and the pages and the stages, but beyond it. Moves into the streets, but beyond it. Moves into the elections and policy, but beyond it. etc. etc.

I'm also not sure what the goals are of this thing, and maybe that's a concern. Maybe that's a plus, as it allows the participants to grow the goals, but maybe it means it will be too loose. I'm very concerned that we won't make tangible next steps, but I'm also very optimistic that we will.

Heather Macdonald

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I am a New Orleans Public school teacher. I am working in an environment that struggles with organization, motivation, and performance. I am hoping that this event will give me another perspective on how to move the school I work at in the right direction. Specifically, I'm looking forward to incorporating the ideas of other professionals into creating a safer, more exciting learning environment. The district has decided that "the test" is the most important part of our job and this makes classes dull and teachers lazy.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

Creating a nonviolent atmosphere/.environment. Encouraging peaceful resolution of problems for a school and community that has never tried anything but violence. The teachers and administrators I work with take one of two approaches . . . punish the violent offender and hope they don't do it again or look the other way while students sort their problems out. There has to be another way to get a violent school under control.

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

I think we should have the goal of creating an ongoing continuous dialogue between professions. The creation and funding of either a newsletter or web-based form of national communication. Some suggestions> a weekly web based chat concerning a topic of concern for all three groups, a listserv, etc., etc.

Ricardo Levin Morales, Northland Poster Collective, Minneapolis, MN

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I was interested by the initial e-mail message that I received about the convergence. It gave the impression of great excitement and a sense of being at a turning point in history. I believe that is the case and am pleased at the chance to discuss what it means with other people who are committed to working on the terrain of art and culture. The call referred to a need for us to overcome the separate roles of educator, artist, and organizer. For me, as probably for some others coming, these roles are very much merged in my work and life. In fact I believe that what we need is not greater integration of these roles but a clearer understanding of how, even together, they are not adequate to the challenges ahead.

I hope to leave with connections to other people who are prepared to explore how to shift the focus of radical art organizing from resistance to a larger, more revolutionary, vision.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

The oppositional-egalitarian current in US culture runs so deep that it seems that we cannot be eradicated. This has allowed us to help shape the terrain we struggle on but has not helped us to win. The increased power of the corporados and the accelerating environmental threats to the planets life systems have raised the stakes such that we cannot be content with survival. In order to shift the balance of power we must be able to think in broader ways than has been our practice: to imagine winning as a practical (if complex) outcome; to understand that there are good defeats and bad victories; that exposing the workings of the empire does not always lead to empowerment and that resistance can be reactionary or radical or both; that the tactical choices we make as activists almost always contain a tension between what is best for the moment and what is best for the future. In other words that although we rely on experience, it is something that can obscure as well as reveal and the road to building grassroots power can run counter to our dearest intuitions and habits of thought.

That is where collective discussion and multiple perspectives are essential. Other people's experiences are essential in order to understand the limits of our own.

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

It seems to me that the question that most calls our attention is what is it that prevents our people from taking their power and using it in harmony with their interests? I do not believe that it has to do with any illusions that things are fine as they are. It does have to do with ways that they (and we activists) see the world and it's possibilities, hope, and the price that must be paid to change or to resist it--things that artist/organizers are well placed to address. Our challenge is to gain more clarity on these questions and translate them into their practical applications.

Carolyn Morris, Executive Director, Alternate ROOTS, Atlanta, GA

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I believe it is a gathering that is going to strengthen the advancement of arts and activism at a very grassroots level and I want to be informed about how I can contribute toward strengthening that movement throughout the 21st Century. It is important to me because I consider myself to be a force for change (however silent I might appear) and how I wield my power toward change must be strategic and impactful. So I hope to leave empowered to further the work of the organization I lead, and to create new waves for peace in my future work where ever it takes me.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

Where does our work intersect? And, how can we be more deliberate about meeting at that intersection toward creating a better world that is inclusive and honors the diverse fabric of many cultures.

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

How do we strengthen the work we do and are doing in a way that is inclusive of those voices that are not included are that are being silenced?

Shelli Rae/John Sullivan

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

I/We are coming to the convergence because we want to make connections with socially conscious artists. I/We (Shelli Rae / John Sullivan) live in Texas & the main thrust of our public art has been the abolition of the death penalty. We would like to share stories, connect with other artists from the South (especially) who are doing this kind of work. We are transplants & we've found that doing activist art in the Deep South or even East Texas is like swimming up a waterfall.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

I'd like to look at art as a lens into systemic racism & class oppression from a variety of different perspectives. We use performance art, more or less traditional theater & Boal's Forum to do this. We'd like to see what other people are doing. Also, we would like to see or hear about inclusive art that creates a safe place for the differently-abled, dementia patients, gender outlaws, and the homeless.

Also work done to support communities under environmental assault.

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

How to awaken critical consciousness in an audience that would activate them to go into the world with a passion for change, that would make them grill authority on all occasions & demand access to the truth, that would inspire people to disobey the illegal & inhumane dictates of illegitimate or misguided or outright evil authority. From a Freirean perspective, from a Brechtian perspective, a Boal perspective, a Pinter perspective, you name it...

S.T. Shimi

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

Because I need to feel a sense of excitement and inspiration on a large-scale in these scary times. I haven't been this jazzed about a catalyst for change since college.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

How the hell do we bridge the "disconnect" between the vague sense that "something ain't right" and actual movement towards protest and change?

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

The Patriot Act and how it is going to impact everybody's freedom of expression and right to assemble and organise.

Barbara Sizle, Executive Director, The Leeway Foundation, Philadelphia, PA

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

We are creating new grant programs that will more directly serve the mission mentioned above, and therefore will incorporate what we call a "lens of change." While we fund only local women artists, we believe that listening deeply to other artists, and talking/learning from art-workers (including art funders), who believe in the power and role of art in our society, will strengthen our ability to best serve our community. I want to learn all I can about artists who are working for social change, and make connections with others who are doing this kind of work, so that we can be as informed, open and inclusive as possible as we create our new guidelines. We very much want to reach and support women artists who are under the radar and not usually supported by mainstream systems. So how we reach them is crucial. Just being in the space with other artists and art-workers who have these same values will be empowering, and I want to soak up as much from all of them as I can.

2) What is one important question that you want to address with artists, educators and organizers who bring perspectives and approaches different from your own?

Can change happen through individual artists? What are various ways that individual artists are working for social change? Is it possible that artists are doing this work but aren't even aware of

it, or know how to communicate it?

3) What is one burning issue/concern/goal that you want to plan or strategize about at this convergence?

Maybe the above question is appropriate here as well. While my immediate concern is the development of our new grant programs, we also want to be a voice and catalyst for additional art funding nationally. I hope to meet new people in N.O. who may be colleagues in this effort.

Andree Thompson

1) Why are you coming to this convergence? Why is it important to you, and what do you hope to leave with?

Why coming? I am 67 years old and have been an artist-activist for many years, usually teaching inner city kids and doing community art projects about the environment. My own work is based on survival. Having experienced family who perished from a former Hitler, the present state of government rings all too familiar and for the first time, I am frightened of losing our rights. I want to be in a position to help educate voters for the next election..it seems to be our only hope at this point. I am very frustrated by the lies of this administration and naivete of middle americans who seem to believe and buy it...I hope to connect with others who can help make a more powerful voice than one individual can alone..and with our creative energy, come up with some positive solutions to present to people like Soros who can help fund such efforts. I am encouraged by MoveOn..I think we have to make art, music, noise and advertisements that educate and tell the truth...more of Bill Moyers.
