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REFLECTIONS ON MONTAUK

My first memory of Montauk is of missing the bus—actually a very good way to start for two reasons:

- 1) It made me more appreciative and eager to get there;
- 2) It represented the beginning of the suspension of time and schedule that characterized Montauk.

When I finally got on the second bus, I entered into what would turn out to be a microcosm of the conference itself.

Now Ted still pretends to blanch when reminded of the rush hour traffic on the Long Island Expressway that day, but I think the choice of route and travel time demonstrated very shrewd planning on the part of the conference organizers.

You see, for the first hour on the bus, we all pretended like there wasn't anything unusual about travelling 10 miles in 20 minutes. We read our conference materials, chatted politely—acted pretty much the way grown-ups are supposed to.

But when it became clear that the world around us was in a perilous state—that we were trying to travel in a system whose infrastructure was bordering on collapse, if it had ever worked at all; that we were actually covering 2 miles in every 20 minutes, at that point it became clear that we could no longer just sit there, running out of polite professional chit-chat.

Somewhere around Jamaica Plains, people started standing up, the conversations changed, got more animated, more crazy, more complex and chaotic.

The barriers between us were beginning to be challenged and to erode.

Even the physical barriers became only obstacles, not limitations—I remember at one point actually

crawling over a bank of seats to better pursue a conversation with Bob Ashley.

In essence, the intimacy forced upon us by the deteriorated condition of our environment was propelling us to new connections, dialogue, and individual initiative and action.

The same can be said of the Montauk conference.

In 1986, the state of the arts of the nation as a whole had evolved to a point of incredible complexity and sophistication, but many people—both in the arts and outside them—were questioning the general health of our arts system.

We had witnessed a veritable explosion of arts activities and organization in the past 20 years, and were beginning to wonder how well it all worked.

In an era of systems analysis, structuralism, and deconstructivism, it was inevitable that we would finally have to consider whether and how the form of our arts system was affecting, or infecting, its content; finally we would have to consider the content itself.

The question, then, as it is now, is where is the art in this system, and, by extension, where are the artists? Those individuals who provide us with the ciphers of our society's soul, that phenomena we call art.

In his keynote address that first night at Montauk, Frank Hodsoll told us where the artists were economically in the current system—and it was in a pretty precarious place. Frank told us that the mean income of American artists the previous year had been \$9,000—down 37% from 8 years before.

Artists were increasingly left out of the conceptual as well as the economic picture. On a fairly subjective level, those of us who were in positions to see and hear from broad cross-sections of the nation's arts community at the time noticed that we weren't hearing a lot about "art"—deficits, long-range planning, office computerizations—sure, but not a lot about art and artists.

Was that because we didn't need to? Were the needs of artists imaginary? What really were the needs of the imagination?

Because these questions struck a disturbing chord in many lives, a few people—by no means everyone who was thinking about these issues—gathered for three overcast days in Montauk.

Again I think the shrewdness and subtlety of our conference organizers needs to be recognized. When it was announced that this conference would continue the spirit and dialogue of Montauk, I had no idea that it could also be arranged to continue the weather.

What did we do at Montauk? My memories are characterized by the diphthong that is phonetically pictured in the dictionary as an "o" wearing a little party hat, the "aaauuu" sound.

We talked -
we walked -
we fought -.

And when we couldn't stand it, or each other, anymore, the clarity of art and primary vowels brought us back to our senses.

Dana danced.
Anthony played.
Bob rapped.

And we were all reminded of why we do what we do, and why we were there, and what we needed to keep at the forefront of our minds at all times, whether we were artists, arts administrators, or funders.

Appropriately, Montauk took as its structural model the act of making art itself—

We were about process, not product. Montauk was a series of explorations and investigations, sketches, really; some that were extremely exciting, suggesting rich veins of thought and creativity to be more fully pursued in the future; and some that were silly, or that could not withstand the scrutiny of the group.

Although we were involved in a collective activity, we were each separately responsible for the application of that experience to our own lives.

Finally, Montauk respected our individuality, and expected us to respond in our own fashions to the

stimuli we were provided, allowing us to set our own agendas for the future.

Since 1986, Montauk has become a short-hand—a code as it were—for a number of people who attended, and I'm pleased to say, for a number who weren't there but who have shared in its ideas and sentiments.

For us at the Pew Charitable Trusts, Montauk was something of a talisman—a charm that changed us and our programs irrevocably.

I will be the first to admit that we probably had a longer way to go than most of the people sitting in the Lief Erikson room at Guernsey's Inn in May 1986.

As many of you know, our cultural activities are focused primarily in the Philadelphia area. Our program guidelines for that year spoke exclusively about institutional advancement, without recognition of how critical artists were to the survival and vitality of our arts organizations. The only mention of individuals in our plans for that year was a flat declaration that we would not consider supporting them.

Our planning documents for the 1989 open with a paragraph that includes this statement, "The program is grounded in an understanding of the Philadelphia cultural community as an integrated ecology of individuals, activities, and organizations. Recognizing that the cultural community is composed of many inter-related elements, support is balanced among projects that sustain the strengths of the community, address its weaknesses, and stimulate its development."

What Montauk did for us was propel an idea that was at the back of our minds—Oh, yeah, artists—to the forefront of our considerations. After all, we were talking about art—how could we have presumed to do so without talking about artists?

It's easier than I would like to admit. We were not much different from many of our philanthropic peers in this oversight, some of the possible reasons for this myopia are explored in the paper I submitted to this conference.

But, Montauk changed us. Montauk provided us with both the stimulation to begin thinking differ-

ently about our activities, and the resources to do something about it.

As I look around this room, I see so many of you—artists, administrators, fellow funders, and just smart people—who we have called upon formally and informally to help us as we have begun to integrate the concerns of artists into our overall program.

Last year 25% of our grants were made in support of artists' fees, commissions, residencies, and services.

The word artist is an active part of our vocabulary—I can still remember the first time I gingerly floated it in an internal document.

Recently we received preliminary approval from our board to develop a fellowship program for Philadelphia artists. We do not consider such a program an end in itself, but are committed to the belief that any direct funding for artists must be part of a larger, integrated support system.

Our goal today is not to identify and isolate a limited number of artists in our midst, but to help foster a supportive environment for the greatest number and diversity of creative individuals.

Which is what brings us to Orcas Island:

we need rejuvenation,
we need information,
we need feedback and dialogue.

We cannot presume that we have the answers, we're here to ask many questions, and to listen to others that haven't occurred to us yet.

We are here, once again, to learn from and be changed by you. And to contribute to your evolutions, and maybe revolutions, in whatever ways we can; recognizing that in the end, we—each one of us—is responsible for implementing those changes in our own lives and work, to the degree and in the manner that each one of us is capable.

While the substance of the conference has yet to unfold, one thing is very clear: few of us, no matter what we do, ever have the chance to share in the lives and expertise of such a diverse and accomplished group of individuals.

I look at this convocation as a type of wonderful university—where we have the opportunity to be exposed to extraordinary resources, thoughts, and individuals.

As in an academic setting, it is the right and the responsibility of each individual to take advantage of those resources in the ways that best suit her or him.

It is also the responsibility of each individual to employ those resources, and whatever knowledge is to be gained from them in her or his future.

In other words, how we each use this experience and what we take away from it is up to us.

So let's have a little faith in ourselves.

Let us set aside the demand to produce immediately, and instead allow ourselves to participate fully—without expectation of singular results, but with the understanding that we can and will be changed, and that we, as individuals, have the obligation to act on those changes in our own respective ways.

My recommendation is that we approach the next three days as sponges—

not the vividly-colored, perfect rectangles that seem to be spontaneously generated on supermarket shelves, and that we use to mop up the debris around our kitchen sinks;

but, taking a cue from our maritime setting, think of ourselves as natural sponges, that take a wide variety of shapes and forms—that will ultimately be rooted in many different soils, in many different seas—but that are uniquely designed to absorb the nutrients in the flow around them, and in doing so, are growing all the time.

So here's to us, and our capacity to spend the next three days as particularly dynamic, aquatic invertebrates.

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