

ZACHARY WAGER SCHOLL: WHAT IS A DRIVING VISION YOU HAVE FOR CULTURAL ORGANIZING?

JENNY ROMAINE: When you're making art, there is nothing there. You have to summon it into being. There is a calendar and there is a community and maybe there's a piece of architecture. We're used to that, so doing the improvisation of organizing, the stakes are high but you understand that, like when you're making a work of art, or you're in a rehearsal, you're going to try something. It might not work, but that's not the end of the world. That just means you tried it and you move on, understanding that if it doesn't work, it's not a failure, it just means that you went that far down that direction and it doesn't serve the piece to keep going that way.

Another driving force is creativity, or fascination with solving a problem — coming to something where you don't have the answer and the work is finding the answer. That's what we do. As an artist, that's very normal. In one of the groups I work with, Milk Not Jails, the whole thing is a work of art based on New York State and economics and jails and neighborhoods. It's a geographic work of art where you have to get the right people talking to the right people. You have to make it up. It's very creative.

DANIEL "MAJESTY" SANCHEZ: Building on what you're talking about: for a long time I was the artist who would get booked to come to a rally and perform, but who wasn't actually organizing. And through the experiences I've gotten over the years, I've come to realize that being an independent hip hop artist is a training ground for organizing. Putting together your own event, booking the venue, promoting it, moving people to be there, the event management, the flow of the whole thing: All those skills are the same skills that are used to put together a rally. Or put

together a press conference. I can see now that the political work I am doing now is the cumulative effect of all my work as an artist.

ZWS: Art or cultural production is so vital to organizing because it's operating from a different vision: There's a different way of relating to time and to relationships that's really vital for organizing and really vital for not destroying one's body or not

ing and my way of engaging and organizing comes from the body. That's what I listen to. That relates to organizing: if I'm not feeling in touch with my body then I know something's not right.

DMS: It's interesting that in cultural organizing, we're utilizing art to engage other people, as opposed to creating our own little world where we can live safely. For me, as early as 10 and 11, writing poetry was complete escape. I could tell my pen and my book anything and they wouldn't judge me. It is conceptually really interesting how doing art can start as a means to escape and cope with reality and become a means to help change reality.

JR: It's also a way to create reality. For instance, we're going to be teaching kids in jail and yeah, there's millions of things that are different between us. We're totally different people who come from really different places; some of us are more oppressed than others. But when you get together it's like, whoa, what are all these fictions and what are all

these things that are done to our bodies that keep us separate? So one of the things I like about the kind of work we do is that we look at that stuff and release, press on those things. I find that the art process is selfish for me in that it's the way that I can actually be in the world. I really want to address incarceration in New York. But if I do it in a way that's always depressed and not making something and not making some amazing idea happen or bloom, building some analysis that's shared out, I'll want to kill myself.

DMS: That's why the Purim space was so incredible to me — the safest freest space I've ever experienced, where we took elements that are going on in the outside world and created an alternate reality and displayed that. It's transformative for the people who take part in the process and



Majesty performs in the Purimspiel, 2014.

spiritually killing yourself in this work and in this world. For me, the foundation of organizing is people's stories and relationship-building and for me as an artist it's also all about people's stories and relationship-building. A driving vision that I have for cultural organizing is that it keeps on working at changing the culture of organizing, changing the way that people relate to organizing in their communities in that it continues to offer that other way of doing work. Or another pace.

JR: You're such an amazing dancer. How does your dance-floor life lead to all this?

ZWS: It's an embodied practice, dancing. It relates to organizing in that I know it in my body when something is really on point and when something is hmmm—I-don't-know-about-that. My knowledge base comes from the body, and all my writ-



Rude Mechanical Orchestra toots horn against white supremacy at the Purimspil, 2015.

for the viewer who just watches the show. In hip hop, there are some people doing amazingly progressive work and I feel like I try to challenge some of that in my own art, but I'm still very within the bounds of form. Form is very big to me. I want to effectively communicate thoughts, so abstract rhyming doesn't really do much for me. I want you to understand what I'm working to say, staying within the rhythmic measure of the music.

JR: What's the relationship of rhythm to your organizing?

DMS: When Zach was talking, I was thinking about that. Because I get that same feeling: We talk about being "in pocket" over a beat, you just feel it. I don't know how, for me, that connects to organizing yet. Six or seven years ago, I didn't know that I was doing cultural organizing. I learned that after the fact. I was like, oh, I really respect y'all's organizing, and they would be like, what are you talking about? You're a cultural organizer. And I would be like, nah, I'm just a guy that raps. And they'd go, yeah, but weren't you organizing people to get on the bus? Weren't you getting people out there? Didn't you inherently learn these talking points about this particular case? Oh wow, I guess I did! Drawing the parallels to being in pocket on a beat — I guess I'm still finding the pocket when it comes to organizing and what that feels like.

JR: What about working with people and in situations where things are fucked up and bad? What about that part of being a cultural organizer, when people are in huge pain? How do you relate to that? I'm curious because part of organizing it seems to me is facing pain head-on. You're trying to change the painful situation and you can't ignore the pain.

DMS: There's a component of cultural organizing that I see through a counseling lens. I come from a substance-abuse counseling background and through art, like writing exercises, individuals can tap into that pain and use the art as catharsis or a way to express it. For cultural organizers, it's super important to be aware of patching people up when that's done. It's irresponsible if I know that I've got an hour to work with a group and we go somewhere in 45 minutes and there's 15 minutes left and someone's been really opened up. I can't be like, oh, the hour's up, see you next week. We're not miracle workers, but have to try to do whatever we can to soothe that so that an individual doesn't walk out of that room completely discombobulated.

Dealing with police violence, we're working with parents who have lost children. I was working on a video with someone and there was a script: they had to say, my name is so-and-so, this member of my family was killed by the police and I was so focused on getting the take right that that parent did about 90 takes. Afterwards

I was like, oh my god, what did I just do? My artistic desire was, we've gotta nail this. The individual was with it, it's not like they wanted to stop. But to think, this individual had to repeat that 90 times. There has to be, if nothing else, on a subconscious level, trauma happening.

JR: Also, sometimes when one is really fucked up, having work to do is amazing. So also, that parent being ready to do 90 takes is like 90 moments to focus the energy. There is this thing about the art that's depersonalizing, because you're thinking about form, while you're thinking about something you really care about and putting that into form. I'm really interested in that and I'm interested in how good music is and how good dance is and how good a good puppet show is. It's really powerful! Like when I hear you recite a poem or rap, Maj, or when I see you dance, Zach, it's like whoa! Just on the level of appreciating the artistry.

DMS: Do you ever feel like craft or the idea of excellence conflicts with the idea of using the art or the craft as an organizing tool? Do you feel that sometimes the idea of being a master at one's craft and holding that in high regard sometimes bumps heads or isn't necessarily in tune with the idea of using the arts or the craft as a means for cultural organizing?

ZWS: I really value craft. I hold it in high regard. I don't feel as if the craft bumps heads with the organizing because the craft creates a container through which people can rise up into their own power. As long as people are showing that — strong and wrong, what-have-you — to me that is the craft. That's captivating. Whether it's creating a dance with people who would never consider themselves dancers and who struggle with movement and conceptualizing their bodies as a thing that can move, creating a container and a craft that gets to be explored and shown, that is cultural organizing. I don't have classical training; a lot of my own craft has come through collaborative process and through the privi-

lege of working with amazing artists and absorbing and internalizing a lot of those lessons.

JR: Where did you learn how to dance like you dance?

ZWS: I learned how to dance in part from working as a go-go boy. But I also grew up moving. It was just a continuation of a language I knew how to speak.

JR: The work of art is how much are we doing what we believe in? And it has to look awesome. You want the music to be really great. But I'm interested in when things collide, the content and who's delivering the content coming together. Because I find who people are to be very potent.

DMS: I don't know if it's unique to hip hop, but there's still, in 2015, the mentality: I am here to be the best. Not necessarily that I'm here to put you down, but I am here to show that my verbal dexterity and my mastery and command of language is better than yours. That's just inherent to hip hop — the idea of the battle. For me, ego comes up. Organizing's all about being inclusive and bringing people together and breeding unity. How can we collaborate on work together to make social change? Whereas the ingrained idea of being an elite MC is counter to that. It's not inclusive. It's the complete opposite.

JR: For me, the competition thing — I always lost. Playing basketball, I'd think: You want the ball so bad? Here, take the ball. I think that's one of the reasons I went into creating my own sort of avant-garde off world because the answer was always no. You go to an audition, no. You do this, no no no. The capitalist world was lose lose lose, you're a loser. And I was like, really? Am I really a loser? I don't think so. Not if I make my own world, and we have a collective and there's no boss and you have to feel your way through and figure out how to be your personal best and be a badass.

DMS: For me, coming from a Justice Committee foundation, discipline and

protocol is vitally important and it's sometimes almost undervalued. Clashing with that there's that idea about artists as free spirits and "I do whatever I want."

ZWS: I took a class once a couple years ago where we were taught about the jazz aesthetic. I think about that class a lot. One of the points was you have to master the craft first and get that discipline before going off on your own solo. You have that bedrock of understanding of the craft and mastery of that as your foundation, and I think about that a lot in terms of art and cultural organizing, and also different cultures of organizing. Yeah. Organizing takes a lot of discipline.

JR: And then, the funk factor. In live performance, shit happens on the stage and you roll with it. And then, sometimes on the street it feels like that. I love working with the Rude Mechanical Orchestra — the level of improvisation. All these people playing music on the street and they do these formations, and they're relating to the chants and relating to the cops. That's a whole other amazing improvised revolutionary practice.

ZWS: I learned a lot from being in the RMO as a musician, and also on the dance team. It's street choreography and we were the ones who had the peripheral vision in the communication from across the lines and across space to say, "Duck!" or say, "You turn now." To have a built culture of response and vision and awareness of one's surroundings both in terms of "We have to run now!" or the organization that we're playing in direct support of changed our chant, and we have to change our entire repertoire right now to serve them because our role is to serve them, and we have to have the vision and the ability to adjust accordingly to support a larger thing.

DMS: That's a really interesting connection I've never thought of: the idea of artistic improvisation as parallel to being in the street. In the street talking about, "But this isn't how it's supposed to happen! You

didn't stick to the script!" — that's not going to be very effective at all. Wow.

JR: And we had some moments, where we met you in the street — remember? You were in the band, it was during the three Black Lives Matter protests and there you were.

DMS: I was actually thinking about that moment. That was the second night of the big Mike Brown protest, after the non-indictment of Darren Wilson. I did not leave my house that night with the intention of leading anything. I left to go and be supportive and be one of the many marching. There was a moment when we were with anywhere from 200 to 400 people and the police had us cornered, and the group was about to start ripping itself apart with, let's go this way, let's go that way, let's go this way. Seeing the Rude Mechanical Orchestra out there was so comforting. I had been just sitting back and critiquing — "Someone should really ..." and literally in the moment, it struck me. "Oh! I'm that someone," and on the fly assembled a tactical team and was like, "This is what we need to do for everyone's safety and to keep this going, are y'all with that?" And everyone just rolled with it. We ended up meeting up with like four or five other cluster groups, and everyone converged on Union Square, and it went from 200 or 300 to thousands of people in Union Square. Rude Mechanical Orchestra: God bless them, seriously.

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