

CultureWork and Creative Democracy

Doug Blandy

University of Oregon

John Dewey's (1939) discussion of "creative democracy," recognized political participation as an inventive and creative activity. Written at the time of the rise of fascism in Europe, Dewey conceptualized democracy as a way of life. A way of life requiring engagement with the political process, policy analysis, strategies for exercising influence, creating arguments, effective communication through multiple medias, listening, building coalitions, negotiating competing interests, maintaining civility, and finding common ground.

Beginning in 1997, *CultureWork* authors and artists have used this forum to critique and imagine the myriad ways in which the arts and culture are part of this lived life. The contributors to *CultureWork* share a common vision for thinking about the way that life is enriched through cultural participation and the participatory characteristics contributing to a creative democracy. *CultureWork* exemplifies a type of free space necessary to democracy. These are spaces in which language, meanings, and futures are created anew. These are spaces in which community, networks, and coalitions are held in the highest regard and from which social change and social justice can emerge.

The recent presidential election campaign, and the inauguration of the forty fifth President, will significantly challenge democracy in the United States and elsewhere. The new presidential administration is built on a rhetoric of institutional and personal failure. The advisories published in *CultureWork* over the past twenty years are a plethora of theoretical perspectives coupled with activities, initiatives, demonstrations, demands, and policy proposals, that do not, in any way, support such a perception. Instead contributors instill confidence in the network of communities, of which *CultureWork* is a part, to sustain the conception of creative democracy inherited from Dewey. In this regard, the contributors to *CultureWork* exemplify Douglas Lummis' (1997) view that democracy is more than a set of institutions or a "system." In the spirit of Dewey, democracy is being and doing, a performance. *CultureWork* and culture work is a part of this performance. This is a performance characterized by working with others, building consensus, designing inclusive discussions, resolving conflict, acting on common concerns, planning for the future and above all being ever vigilant to ward off those individuals and initiatives that compromise a commitment to, and application of, democratic principles.

References

- Dewey, J. (1939). Creative democracy – the task before us. *John Dewey and the promise of America, progressive education booklet, no. 14*. American Education Press.
- Lummis, D. (1997). *Radical democracy*. Ithica, NY: Cornell.