

The ART of Engagement

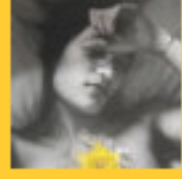
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11th June 2008: for theron, reprise on being invisible

Posted by [rajni shah](#) on June 11, 2008 at 9:21am

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10.06.08

dear theron

last night got me thinking again about being invisible.

because when i'm in west london at a 'proper theatre' i get a little uneasy, feel out of my depth, aware that there is no-one who is similar to me in the audience; the truth of it is, i get a little bit scared and sometimes i respond by being a bit loud and naughty as if to show that i do exist and i am different and valid. it was funny to realise this, and it reminded me about that experience of going to the [Royal Court](#) the other day and feeling like a child, staring at all the people who seemed at ease and looked like adults. also, my excitement at finding the book [invisible man](#) recently, which i devoured even though reading is usually so slow for me. and then i thought about that [earlier blog post](#), the one for 'an invisible woman', and i started musing on the layers of visibility in our society, those lines of awareness and non-awareness and purposeful ignorance that so define the idea of community. so i'm working through this and since you know me so well perhaps you will both understand something more of me and see where i'm going with this.

you see, one of the things that has been so wonderful for me about working with the drop-in group is that i get to meet people who live and work in my neighbourhood but with whom i would never usually have the chance to interact, people who are intelligent and beautiful and passionate but whose wit gets ignored by most people because of their profession and the difficult turns their lives have often taken (which frequently make them very difficult neighbours). and working with them all, i am so aware that they are nurtured by simply being noticed. it brings, i suppose, a kind of status, something related to class but much more immediate and emotionally graded.

and this led me to think about how it often happens, because i am quiet and maybe because i listen more than talk, that i sit at the edge of a heated conversation and don't find a way in. or how sometimes i do say something, but it's so quiet no-one hears it. and then a little later, or a lot later, the same thing is said by a louder person to much more acclaim!! in most situations, this doesn't matter at all, and i find ways of being heard, of saying something. but it also led me to think about what it is that being an artist does in terms of visibility, setting a stage, giving a frame to something, and giving permissions. something like:

being an artist = gaining visibility and vision

= gaining a right to speak, to take action

= being allowed to give voice

= having the privilege to notice more and to cross certain lines of invisibility

= giving myself permission to be (someone else/more myself/the same person but with purpose/in service)

and with this comes that old question of responsibilities. in this privileged role, is there anything we 'must' do? must we make voices louder, make a statement? must we (re)present certain people depending on who we as individuals are or look like? should we make a claim for quieter voices, let them be heard? and what is the value of listening, just listening, or observing?

i feel i've spilled with this letter into lots of different territories and now i'm not reaching a conclusion. but i suppose that is kind of apt, that it does as my work tries to do and asks questions, wanders over what are claimed as territories, opens things up. maybe there are some threads here that you or others will take up, run with in different directions. or maybe it will just pass by and we'll keep going, holding onto nothing, doing our best, walking and being and saying hello. thanks for your kind ear, it helps me be someone.

yours always,
rajni.x.

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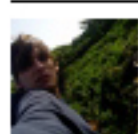
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Comment by [Eleanor](#) on June 17, 2008 at 8:47am

Just back from a learning exchange in Charleston, SC, with Resources for Social Change. Once again we used a story circle and once again I witnessed the power of being heard. Most of us hunger to be heard. Thank you, Rajni and Theron, for showing another facet of this truth.



Comment by [theron schmidt](#) on June 11, 2008 at 12:02pm

and sometimes the function of speaking (or, as in this case, writing) can be to make a space where others can be heard. your way of speaking is always an invitation for others to join you. even if it's only hearing themselves, in their own heads. you teach me to listen more. x



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