



**“The Citizen Artist”
Sermon by Eric Liu • Civic Saturday
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I want to begin with deepest gratitude to Stephanie Ybarra and Oskar Eustis and the entire team at the Public Theater and Joe’s Pub.

I’m not a preacher but I sometimes play one on TV. I’ve played one in a settlement house for immigrants. I’ve played one in a former Christian Science temple. I’ve played one in a multiracial Presbyterian church, in a steel-and-glass Rem Koolhaas library, in an exposed-beam latte-scented coworking space, in a musty underground bookstore. And now, in the cabaret space of the greatest theater in the greatest city in the world.

Now you might say, “*Play* a preacher? You are one. You’re preaching.” It’s true. I am. But it’s also true that I’m playing. I mean this two ways. The first of course is that this is not church and I am not ordained. We are here using the frame, the ritual, the raiments of a faith gathering to illuminate and activate our sense of civic religion in America today. That’s what we do at Citizen University and it’s why we invented Civic Saturdays.

The other way I’m playing is that we’re all playing – today, and every day, we play the social roles that circumstance and convention assign us and, where circumstance and convention may be ambiguous, the roles we think or guess we ought to play.

This second sense of playing is fundamental to citizenship. You might say it *is* citizenship: playing a role in public with other people’s eyes on you, when some of the parameters are clear but most aren’t and some of the script is legible but most isn’t.

What are the norms in here? It’s supposed to be church-ish but it’s a crowded black-box space for bands and performers. It’s supposed to be serious and deep but you’re eating Eggs Benedict and drinking Bloody Marys, for God’s sake. We’ve got to figure it out together, what we’re doing here. We’ve got to show each other respect and humility and curiosity and playfulness if we’re going to figure it out.

And what a day for figuring things out.

A year ago today, I daresay most of us were marching. Now we are gathered in a dark closed space and yet I submit to you we are still marching. We are here because we realized, during that glorious cascade of global marches last year, that to vote is also to march. To write is also to march. To sing is also to march. To organize is also to march.

To persuade, or to be persuaded, is to march. To bring to bear people, money, ideas, customs, and every other form of power to unelect malefactors of great wealth and to contain white nationalists and their enablers. This, too, is to march.

For what *is* a march but a most stylized form of the sprawling subtle theater of democracy? A march is to democracy as the Home Run Derby is to baseball: a distilled performance of the thing's most potent essence. So we *are* playing, all of us. We *are* performing. We *are* creating. Just by deciding to show up here and participate. Which is also why our friends at Federation have deemed this Art Action Day.

To make conversation in public is to make art. To make art in public is to make power. To make power in public is to make democracy.

The relationship of the citizen and the artist is what the Greeks puzzled over, until out of their puzzling poured forth both the theater and the republic. Today, Art Action Day 2018, I want to speak in some depth about this relationship of citizen and artist. I'll reflect first on the artist as citizen. Then on the citizen as artist. And I'll conclude with some thoughts about the meaning and the fragile future of civic imagination itself.

THE ARTIST AS CITIZEN

There are two ways of interpreting the term "citizen artist." One is simply the artist who is a good citizen. And that's the definition I'd like to explore first.

I should begin by pointing out, since this is not my home church, that when I say "citizen" here I am not speaking about documentation status under the immigration and naturalization laws of the United States. I mean the bigger, more capacious ethical notion of being a member of the body, a contributor to community. A non-sociopath.

Watching the current occupant of the presidency and some of the humans he is persecuting, we are reminded that there are plenty of people in this country who lack the documents but live like citizens – and plenty of people who have them but don't.

So the artist as citizen, in *this* sense, is someone who through her creations is a contributor to community – is, indeed, a catalyst for the transformation of community, real and imagined. Ava DuVernay. JR. Lynn Nottage. Lin-Manuel Miranda. Sarah Ruhl. Young Jean Lee. Jose Antonio Vargas. Carrie Mae Weems. Tony Kushner.

Each of these artists is making work that challenges us to live like citizens: to dismantle the prison-industrial complex; to reckon with staggering inequality, to empathize with working people of every color who've been displaced by globalized trade; to see in every black or brown orphan a possible Founding Father or Mother; to lift the burden of whiteness and to see just how heavily that burden falls on whites; and to know that every age will give us a new Roy Cohn and a new plague and a new thirst for angels.

Most importantly, they have taken risks: creative risks, reputational risks, power risks. And this presses the rest of us to ask, “What have *I* risked lately for the good of all?”

As we sit here, the fearless members of the Belarus Free Theater are making secret plays in a nation where they have been threatened and imprisoned, where their work is censored, where theater itself is a threat to state security. The founders were smuggled to London for their own safety to London, and over Skype they continue to direct underground performances by their cast members.

Last fall, Jená and I and my stepdaughter Zoey were in Prague for what happened to be the annual Vaclav Havel Festival in the theater district. On that day the three founders of the Belarus Free Theater were performing their work *A Time For Women*, which describes the persecution, imprisonment, and exile of three journalists and activists who’d been leading the fight for democracy in Minsk. The performance was in Russian with supertitles promised in both Czech and English. But the English supertitles never appeared. So for the next two hours, in a tiny space about a quarter the size of this room, we three Americans sat in the dark a few feet from three Belarussian women enacting a perilous fight for freedom, with their gestures and glances and certain recurring cries the only keys we had to decode the plot.

And it was thrilling. Because the plot was freedom. The protagonist was freedom. The motive was freedom. The inciting incident was freedom. The conflict was freedom. Freedom is not the mere absence of encumbrance. That’s liberty. Freedom is the ability to create in the company of others; *because* of the company of others. That’s *life*. Deprived of our language sense, we took in this play with a heightened moral sense. We left tasting our freedom acutely, like a bit tongue.

Can you taste *your* freedom? The folks here at The Public did when they staged *Julius Caesar* last summer with a vaguely Trumpian Caesar and incurred the wrath of the right-wing media. I happened to have been here that afternoon, talking to Oskar and Stephanie about this very series we have kicked off today. I was impressed by Oskar’s clarity and calm amidst that shitstorm (a word, by the way, that should be making its way into the Times Style Guide any second now). The point, he said over and over again, was not the murder of a demagogue; it was the betrayal of the republic by those in the demagogue’s circle. Which I imagine was not the response Fox News was looking for.

The folks here know their own minds. And they know how to make their minds known. Which is what an artist, a citizen, and an artist *as* citizen must always know.

In Washington Square Park, Ai Wei Wei has constructed an immersive experience that invites us to realize how privileged are those who see cages as only art. In Seattle – actually, downstairs from us in our office in Pioneer Square, an organization called Amplifier last year invited visual artists to create and donate images, then disseminated those images to tens of millions of people. You are holding some of those iconic images now. If you marched last year, you held them up on placards. The marchers today are

holding these and other images, and Amplifier has launched a Power to the Polls open call for new art from new artists that will spark new participation in politics.

In the Twin Cities, a nonprofit called Springboard for the Arts invites artists around the country to create playful “toolkits” in response to citizen requests. How can I get neighborhoods across the city to collaborate? How can I get to know the people on my street? The “answers” have ranged from pop-up galleries to 500-person communal meals to sculptural bike racks – and the tools to replicate those projects anywhere.

In Wichita and Miami and Philadelphia and West Palm and Akron and Grand Forks and Charlotte and St. Paul and all around this country, my team at Citizen University has created a project called The Joy of Voting, in which we’ve invited visual artists, spoken word artists, theater artists, dancers and musicians to generate local projects that rekindle a culture that once existed in cities across the country, before the advent of television: a culture of joyful, raucous participation in voting and elections. Street theater, open-air debates, dueling toasts, battles of the bands, competing parades, bonfires and broadsides.

There is a common thread across these projects: invitation. Artists invite. Not just in the obvious way of inviting audiences and praying they show. (Bless you for being here, by the way). But in the deeper sense of drawing us into places we wouldn’t otherwise go to because we didn’t know they were there or we did but were too scared to enter or we were lost in our phones and we didn’t know places was the point of being.

This is what artists who are civically awake show and teach all of us even when their work has not a trace of didacticism. They instruct us how to conjure from thin air the very real power of collective action. There is no better proof than an artist of my third law of power in civic life. Law number one: power compounds. Duh. Law number two: power justifies itself. See: white supremacy, male supremacy, trickle-down economics, divine right, and “because I said so.” But law number three saves us and it is this:

Power is infinite.

Most of us most of the time forget this truth. But every artist who is awakened and participating in the life of her community and country reminds us of it. Forces us to see it. The artist is catalytic. And of course for this chemical reaction to happen there is a key component that is not the artist. It is us. We everyday citizens. We the people, who are to be ignited or transmuted. Yet we are more than inert. We are catalysts too. Which brings us to the second notion I want to explore today, the citizen as artist.

THE CITIZEN AS ARTIST

During the Women’s March last year, the most palpable and memorable thing was not the numbers, impressive though they were. It was the staggering display of humor and ingenuity and beauty. The signs, the puppets, the posters, the icons, the costumes, the

ballads, the chorales, the choreography. Our politics has been so devoid of such bottom-up creativity and imagination.

But when I speak of the citizen as artist, I'm not focusing on how everyday citizens perform as dancers, singers, painters, sculptors. When I speak of the citizen as artist, I mean that citizenship itself is an art: a genre of generativity, a container for creativity. To be a citizen *is* to be an artist. Consider these six simple propositions:

1. To be a citizen is to put out a call and listen for who shouts it back.

Indivisible did this, when four young Hill staffers published a Google doc a year ago about how to bend your member of Congress to the will of the people. That document went wildly viral, which its creators expected. Then the readers of the document decided to self-organize geographically, which was completely unexpected. Today there are over 6,000 local Indivisible chapters across every congressional district in the land. Through call-and-response a movement breathed itself into existence. And by the way, is exactly how the Tea Party movement emerged a decade ago – only then they didn't have Google docs and Facebook. They used multi-thousand-person conference calls! But the fact that that movement sprang out of one man's rant on CNBC against federal bank bailouts is a good reminder that the left has no monopoly of civic artistry.

2. To be a citizen is to invent new hybrid forms out of what we find lying around.

Today's young libertarian activists are doing a pretty effective job of this, often out of view of older liberals and conservatives of the mainstream. They're mashing up Internet culture – short videos, memorable memes – with earnest interpretations of Hayek and from Reason magazine and the Cato Institute. Of course, the alt-right is also diabolically good at Internet culture, and its messages and methods mutate rapidly in online petri dishes. The earnest and well-meaning do not have a monopoly on civic artistry.

3. To be a citizen is to turn fragments of thought into poetry with the compact sharpness of arrowheads.

#BlackLivesMatter. #MeToo. #NeverthelessShePersisted. #NotYourAsianSidekick. #FightFor15. #DreamersUnite. War, said the famous Prussian strategist Clausewitz, is politics by other means. Each of these hashtags, crafted by no one you had ever heard of before, reminds us that poetry can be war by other means.

4. To be a citizen is to convert absolute awfulness into hope and hope into power.

When my friend Amanda Nguyen was sexually assaulted in college she could have given into self-centered despair. Instead she lobbied Congress tirelessly to create in 2014 the first federal bill of rights for survivors of sexual assault. She then created, out of nothing more than the power of her example, a national organization called Rise that's now working to pass similar bills in every state legislature in the country. She's 26.

That's remarkable as an act of citizen organizing. It's in some ways even more remarkable as an act of moral re-creation. "Who always wants something from someone else?" asked the playwright Maria Irene Fornes. "Criminals and Americans," she said. We laughed when we first heard that. But Amanda Nguyen complicates the picture. She is an American who, suffering at the hands of a criminal, has wanted since only to secure for all women basic justice and dignity.

5. To be a citizen is to use the barest frames of structure to spur improvisations.

The People's Supper is an organization that has been inviting folks to bring neighbors and strangers together for intentional meals that have only a few simple ground rules and some simple if profound conversation prompts. *Who are your people? How do you find strength when your cup is empty?* The results, in cities and small towns across the United States, have been transformative. Code for America has been sponsoring civic hack-a-thons in cities nationwide, inviting coders and developers to software-writing battles where the point is to come up with the most elegant, most beautiful solutions to the problems in the technology that local governments use.

Do you know who else operates like The People's Supper and Code for America? Jazz musicians. But the chord chart that yields the best possible, the most hard-to-anticipate, the most mind-blowing improvisational riffs you ever heard is not the B-minor blues. It's *E Pluribus Unum*.

6. To be a citizen is to make the rituals that make a nation.

Five years ago, Jená and I attended several naturalization ceremonies. Nothing on any stage, even here at the Public, gets me choked up like the roll call of countries during this ceremony, when the immigrants are asked to rise as their nation of origin is named alphabetically, and after they have all been called they are told, "The next time you sit down you will be Americans." Then they take the oath of citizenship. One day Jena asked a simple question. What if all of us had a ritual like this? Not just naturalizing immigrants but also we who had done nothing to earn our citizenship but have the dumb luck to be born here. What if together the newcomer and the native-born could take part in a ceremony to renew our vows to the idea of this country? She started sketching a revival tent with a stage. Did I mention that Jená is a theater artist? "It's not being born-again," she said. "It's being *sworn-again*." Did I mention that she is from Louisiana? And out of that inspiration emerged one of our projects, called Sworn-Again America. We created a downloadable template for a ceremony with a script, readings of iconic American texts, and a brand-new oath that is about citizenship not in the legal sense but in the moral sense: showing up for each other. Countless people have shown up for Sworn-Again America ceremonies in military bases, college campuses, public parks, concert halls, national museums, at *quinceneras* and conference halls.

So let me recap. Put out a call so that it comes back amplified. Make hybrid forms out of the material you inherit. Weaponize poetry. Alchemize pain. Improvise like a pro. Create new rituals to create a new story of us.

That's a list of things citizens do. It's also a list of things artists do. *And I insist to you, these are the same thing. Citizenship is art.*

Many Americans, under the category "citizen," have the mental model of the janitor or the judge or the Scout or the Samaritan. But the model that fits best is the artist. I want you to leave today and tell the people you know that they are artists composing a community, devising a country, workshopping a *We* using nothing but a random pile of little *Me*'s and the falling-apart wire frame of the Constitution. I want you to walk around your neighborhood tomorrow and look at it with the eyes of an artist, and ask, *Why is this not a park? Who decided the payday lender should be here? What if the subway opened out into something more alive? How could these old folks and these little kids be making something together?* Because every day is Art Action Day.

Citizenship, like *all* art, requires us to make something that coheres out of the tidal incoherence that is the world. Citizenship, like *all* art, demands that we take responsibility for our errors and acknowledge our debts and then transcend both. Citizenship, like *all* art, is only as useful as the imagination that animates it. And it's on this last notion – the limits of our imagination – that I want to close today.

CIVIC IMAGINATION

When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, April 4, 1968, Robert Kennedy was en route to Indianapolis for a campaign rally. Many of you know the story that when Kennedy arrived, most of the large biracial crowd at the rally had not heard the news. And so he had to walk up on to this flatbed truck as his followers cheered and waved RFK signs and he had to ask them to be quiet and he had to tell them. And into that terrible silence, he extemporized one of the great American speeches.

There are three things notable about that speech, from the distance of a half century. One was the moral depth that Robert Kennedy summoned in that moment: his empathy for black Americans who might feel a murderous impulse for vengeance; his insistence that King's hateful murder made King's call for love and nonviolence even more urgently necessary; a candid admission that we might not be able anymore to answer that call.

Second was his quotation of an ancient Greek dramatist. No political adviser would ever have counseled it but it's the authentic sound of a citizen artist. He was not showing off his erudition. He was sharing with the crowd the private source of poetic solace that had carried him through the preceding four and a half years. Most people aren't aware that this was first time since November 22, 1963 that RFK had spoken in public about JFK's assassination. And even then, his instinctively elliptical phrasing – "I had a member of my family killed" – is revealing both of his pain in saying it out loud and his desire to maximize the bond with all who grieved for King: after all, "a member of my family" is more general and relatable than "my brother John, the former president."

And this wholly unexpected speech did keep that rally that night from disintegrating into blind rage and violence. But here alas is the third thing that's important about that speech. It did not stop African Americans ghettos and college campuses and town squares across the rest of the nation from being consumed by uprising and flame the rest of that year. It did not speed the efforts of the United States government to address racial inequity. It did not slow the shedding of American blood at home or abroad.

No speech quoting no poem can do that by itself. Moral imagination and civic imagination of the kind that late-stage RFK was demonstrating – remember, *early* RFK was a nepotistic, womanizing, entitled son of a bitch; but late RFK, grieving for his brother, sure that his own sins had fueled this tragedy, in a hurry to shed his privilege, was starting to see poor people and brown people as his brothers and his sisters – this kind of imagination is rare and special. And seeing it crystallized in seven minutes in Indianapolis makes you realize it is not enough.

Imagination, especially in times of crisis, must be coupled with the practice of power. For it's only the practice of power that can make the imagined real. King had been in Memphis the day he was shot because he had recently expanded his imagination to lead not just a civil rights fight but a Poor People's Campaign. He had come to mobilize striking sanitation workers. RFK is a tragic and tantalizing figure – a human *What if?* – because he had long understood the exercise of power and he was lately coming into a wider moral sensibility about building King's beloved community. Had he lived and led this nation in its hour of peril, what might we be today?

But here's the thing. Though he did not live, we did. Though he did not govern us then, we govern ourselves now. In *this* hour of peril. One year ago, nearly at this very moment, Donald Trump swore an oath to uphold the Constitution, and nearly every day since then has broken it. As far as he's concerned the Constitution is just words. Well, he's right. All promises are just words. All covenants are just words. What animates them is not whether the words are in big black letters but whether we choose to honor them. And Trump's choice does not dictate ours.

So enough about presidents. The fact that we are here this day says we don't want our lives to revolve around a president or to be defined by resistance to that president. We want to create power, not just combat it. We remember that *creation* is the real long game. It is where art and citizenship are joined.

Uncle Tom's Cabin made it possible to imagine a day without slavery in America. Then John Brown and Wendell Phillips and William Lloyd Garrison sped the day and later Abraham Lincoln and U.S. Grant and William Tecumseh Sherman forced the dawn. *Will and Grace* – the first time around – helped change the narrative about gay relationships. Then thousands of loving couples and idealistic organizers and opportunistic politicians and dogged lawyers closed the deal at the Supreme Court, which did not make the law of the land in *Obberfell vs United States* but only ratified it. *We* had made it.

When we get a Dream Act – and I believe we will – it will have happened not because a gang of six or eight senators cut a deal but because activists like Cristina Jimenez and Jose Antonio Vargas and Maru Mora Villalpando and Ravi Ragbir and thousands of other young undocumented neighbors and friends and coworkers of ours took the risk to tell their stories in public. And because we who have the documents stood beside them.

Let's imagine a society recommitted to inclusion, confident in its diversity, suffused with character and decency in every circle, nimble in the face of change, unafraid to hold ourselves as taxpayers and moral choicemakers to a creed that says we're all better off when we're all better off. And let's practice power to create that society – by organizing the people, the ideas, the money, the muscle, the norms, and the votes to make it so.

Citizen artists of New York, unite: We have a country to create.

Readings to Precede the Sermon

**Sarah Ruhl, from *100 Essays I Don't Have Time to Write*
31. *On Maria Irene Fornes*
Published 2014**

Maria Irene Fornes was once my teacher. She objected to the language of intention in the method school of acting, to the constant refrain: "What does my character want in this scene?" One day she said to us, "Who always wants something from someone else? Only criminals. And Americans."

**Robert F. Kennedy
From Remarks Delivered in Indianapolis, Indiana
April 4, 1968**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm only going to talk to you just for a minute or so this evening, because I have some – some very sad news for all of you -- Could you lower those signs, please? – I have some very sad news for all of you, and, I think, sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world; and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black – considering the evidence evidently is that there were white people who were responsible – you can be filled with bitterness, and with hatred, and a desire for revenge.

We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization – black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand, and to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand, compassion, and love.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to fill with – be filled with hatred and mistrust of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say that I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man.

But we have to make an effort in the United States. We have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond, or go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poem, my – my favorite poet was Aeschylus. And he once wrote:
“Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.”

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

The United States Constitution
Article II, Section 1, Clause 8

Before he enters the Execution of his Office, he shall take the following Oath or Affirmation:—“I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my Ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.”