



Summit Participants Discuss Arts, Culture After Catastrophe

By Naomi Person

September 08, 2005 — The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council has organized an international summit—that starts today—inviting artists, architects, community activists, and scholars to discuss the place of arts and culture after a catastrophic event. WNYC’s Naomi Person reports:

How do people make sense of daily life after catastrophe?” That’s the question this gathering will address—surviving human-made disaster--not those caused by acts of nature. Radhika Subramaniam curated the summit for the LMCC.

RADHIKA: ... Dealing with a trauma or dealing with an event cycles and recycles all the time. New voices come in; old voices disappear. But I don’t think it is every completely obliterated

Subramaniam is bringing together Native Americans and those who’ve had to sift through the devastation of civil wars in Lebanon and Northern Ireland, Pol Pot’s reign in Cambodia, state terrorism in Argentina and apartheid in South Africa. People like Suada Kapic, of Sarajevo who can speak about devising strategies for surviving terror, fear and loss. She runs a multi media group called FAMA. During the four year seige of her hometown they produced a Sarajevo Survival Guide with tips on how to find food, water and kindling..

1503 ...And every place was like kind of victims and blood and dead people and wounded people. But what we did against that was we just celebrated life and our strength to make choice with humor, with creation, with invention, with intelligence against that barbarism.

Artist and designer Clive van den Berg, is coming to the summit from South Africa. He’s designing a museum complex in Johannesburg on the site of South Africa’s new Constitutional Court and it’s most notorious colonial and apartheid prisons.

CLIVE: We’re dealing with people still living in this country who have been deeply hurt and traumatized in their life...they will come to these sites and often be retraumatized....They want to relocate their memory quite literally. I was in prison there, or hurt there or it looked like this. The need for explicit narrative is powerful in that segment of the population.

But, van den Berg says, his museums must also engage people who've never been there before, people who will come after the present generation has passed away. Those dual demands might sound familiar to people following the debate about cultural redevelopment at the World Trade Center site. But South Africa has more than a decade to think about documenting their experiences.

CLIVE: We've learned that our aesthetic solutions should be provisional and somewhat tentative rather than certainties that will be there forever.

Van den Berg's design flexibility comes out of living through a time when uniformity of thought was law. He hopes his museum will provide a platform for debate and contestations that are inevitably part of the new South Africa

Organizers of the summit here are hoping New Yorkers who attend will do what they do so well.....engage in conversation to imagine the new New York.

For WNYC, I'm Naomi Person.

If you want to register to attend the summit, Cities Art and Recovery, which runs today through Sunday go to their website at www.lmcc.net/recovery