

PREFIGURATIVE POLITICS AND RADICALLY ACCESSIBLE PERFORMANCE SPACES

MAKING THE WORLD TO COME

If, as the African revolutionary leader Amilcar Cabral described it, culture is the "collective personality of a people," then the arts are its collective dreamlife. In the absence of coercive control, the arts, like dreams, are naturally drawn to the deepest hopes, fears, and truths that are suppressed in daily life ... art becomes conscious dream-telling, responsible creation with the potential to affect the life of our people.
—Ricardo Levins Morales

Prefigurative politics is a fancy term for the idea of imagining and building the world we want to see now. It's waking up and acting as if the revolution has happened. It's, for example, building a sliding scale community acupuncture clinic that is affordable and centers disabled and working-class/poor and Black, Indigenous, and people of color instead of writing reports about how the medical-industrial complex is fucked up. (Though that can be important too.) I think of it as akin to the Allied Media Conference principles of "We spend more time building than attacking" and "We focus on our power, not our powerlessness."

The higher education programs where I studied writing and performance taught basically zero about creating accessibility in making performance art, theater, and spoken word. The focus was almost always

on creating the work of Art, in a vacuum. Almost no attention was paid to the audience, the performance space, the container, and the community for the art as being as important as the art itself, and not separable from the art. Practical skills—from how to make a flyer or a budget to how to do successful ASL and make a fragrance-free space or a performance whose pace was accessible to non-hyper-able-bodied performers—were neglected in those ivory towers. I think that if anyone had asked about how to create accessible spaces, for performers or attendees, they would have been, gently or not so gently, dissed. That stuff, that's about community-based art, or art therapy—not real, professional, capital A art. As a performer and curator/producer, I believe that how you do it and who is there to see it is as important as what is on the stage. My favorite performance spaces are spaces that become temporary, two-hour communities that are autonomous zones that feel like freedom. Being in them, we can smell and taste and feel things we have always wanted but rarely witnessed—both in what we see on stage and how we interact and participate as an audience that serves as a community of witnesses. Having an accessible space for performers and attendees and workers, where disability is not marginalized, tokenized, or simply absent, is very different from having a performance space that is full of mostly able-bodied, young, non-parenting people who can afford to spend the money to attend and/or to get there in the first place.

As oppressed people, we don't control a lot of things. But one thing we can sometimes control is the stage. The stage can be prefigurative politics.

I often tell a story about Patty Berne, the cofounder and Haitian Japanese femme powerchair-using disabled badass artist and organizer of Sins Invalid. I once asked her why she had chosen to use performance art as her primary way to advance disability justice. Why not just do a workshop? She paused and said, “You know, I could do workshops until I was blue in the face, trying to convince white disabled people or