

PEACE UPON ART

An interview with Guila Clara Kessous, UNESCO Artist for Peace



TC: What role can art play in the quest and progress towards peace?

GCK: Art aims to restore the nature of our relationship with others. With dramatic arts, I chose an art form that is not practiced in solitude. Art – and theatre in particular – must take into account the relationship with others. At Harvard, I work with messages of peace and human rights that could be vehicles for the dramatic arts. During certain missions for UNESCO, I used drama therapy to help traumatized individuals recover their “voice” and express their suffering. In a context of conflict, the dramatic arts help with the emergence of non-violent and non-destructive dialogue. It is a method for returning to the stage of observation. Without even realizing it, we construct our relationship with others based on interpretations and filters that distort our perceptions and bias our interactions.

Often very early on in the relationship, we have already reduced the person in front of us to a stereotype or to a utilitarian guise. Art is a new channel, an unexpected opportunity to observe the other person in his or her humanity and reality.

And going beyond observation, I would even say that art incites a more profound “observance” of the rules of humanity. For me, art is a terrain for deconstructing man. It tries to explain and break down the mechanisms of life. It is a technique for deciphering human beings. If I chose theatre over literature, it is because theatre speaks to more than just the mind. It also includes the body – without which we are not present in the world and which we remain “forgotten” in our society.

Art allows us to embrace the fact that we are subjects of observation and actors of creation. I am the one who observes and creates, I am the one who expresses a vision and a discourse, I am the one who creates an opening to what is beautiful. What is beautiful does not always have to be useful, and vice versa. In the end, we want to separate from Marcel Duchamp’s philosophy and his forced vision of trivial and ordinary Beauty. I believe that Beauty is intimately linked to the inclination of man towards ethics. I create Beauty by taking a “detour” and refining a harsh relationship to others through art. For me, this detour is a sign of humanity. Thus, we realize that the dignity of our relationship to others is vital for our own survival.

What is a peace dialogue?

A peace dialogue is above all a dialogue of non-violence. I intentionally regard this concept in its negative construction; the absence of violence, the absence of the desire for destruction. If we come back to a certain form of innateness of humanity, one must question how can we negate the fact that our human nature is made up of different emotions, some of which provoke the will to dominate and do harm?

In order to reach a level of non-violent discourse, there are numerous techniques available in the art world: reformulation, active listening, learning to give and receive as many compliments as there are criticisms, deconstructing stances of

violence and stereotype. Particularly in France, we have had the “yes, but” disease ingrained in us all throughout our education in the form of a critical distance necessary in essay writing. We only have to listen to current French political debates to be able to count the recurrent “yes, but” formulations that show a clear will to not really listen to what the other is saying. Attempting to replace “yes, but” with “and at the same time” is one example of a theatrical technique at the service of non-violent communication.

We accept to occupy common ground, even if the two points of view seem paradoxical. Thanks to art, we learn to grasp what is distinctly human and distinguish what are undoubtedly our individual personal limits and the limits of others. This realization allows us to gain in self-confidence and better decide the distance that we want to put between others and ourselves. It allows us to protect ourselves better, to shelter the epitome of our humanity. And, paradoxically, this new capacity to find the right distance strengthens our aptitude to give, made possible by a feeling of security, in tune with our bodies, faced with one another.



Guila Clara Kessous recently published “70 quotes for Peace”, a book, created to mark the 70th anniversary of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), features 70 quotes from artists, intellectuals, activists, politicians and statesmen. The quotes all testify to a strong conviction that peace, in order to be sustainable, must be built upon a mutual understanding between people and the intellectual solidarity of humankind. But they also demonstrate that each person bears within himself a huge capacity for tolerance and dignity that he can choose to use to achieve this ideal.

Bilingual book published by Gallimard editions.