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doi:10.1017/S0149767716000358

Randy: Art and Public Policy

Kathy Engel

He may have stopped dancing, but he never stopped dancing.

He pirouetted through the halls of a place called NYU with the elegant precision of a surgeon and the infectious delight of a Puck. His intellectual agility defied the walls of the sixth floor of 665 Broadway in a city vibrating with movement, only matched by the uncanny muscles of a mind so stretched and disciplined that upside down arabesques in the midtown tunnel wouldn't have been a surprise.

The grammar in this tribute to my friend and colleague may seem untethered. Perhaps the commas or periods don't reflect expected pauses or stops. Randy Martin metaphorically pushed punctuation to make phrases that named and deconstructed the arithmetic of power, opening up a marvelous un-naming and re-imagining, moving toward an embodied language of liberation.

He tight-roped and cartwheeled through a space called a classroom.

An archeologist, he excavated and reconstructed the bones of inequity.

An architect, he created a physical, intellectual, and aesthetic space to explore the forbidden terrain of capitalism within the walls of universe-ity/city and outside those walls, collapsing arbitrary and artificial dividers, leaping into the physics of the possible, the politics of survival and beauty, the challenge, necessity, and complication of the pronoun "we."

All with the deft wit and timing of a good cartoonist.

Kathy Engel (tisch.arpo@nyu.edu) is a poet who spent most her adult life working at the nexus of social justice movements and art/imagination. She co-started numerous organizations and projects, including MADRE (an international women's human rights group), which she directed for five years; Riptide Communications; The Hayground School; and Poets for Ayiti. She has worked as director of organizations, producer, convener, writer, educator, and strategic consultant. Her books include *Ruth's Skirts*, poems and prose; and *We Begin Here: Poems for Palestine and Lebanon*, co-edited with Kamal Boullata. She has performed her work, read and spoken about arts/politics throughout the country, and traveled to Central America, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. She is associate arts professor and chair of the Department of Art and Public Policy, Tisch School of the Arts, NYU.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767716000358 Published online by Cambridge University Press

As our colleague, the artist Pato Hebert, reminds me, Randy used to suggest to us all that we share not a practice, but a predicament. He told our students that they were working to create a GPS for a world that doesn't yet exist.

How did Randy Martin sharpen so many lenses?

How did he build so many lexicons?

It's a mystery of plentitude.

What energy force enabled him to jazz a sax, slam a volley with a racket, and make each student and colleague feel: (1) unsettled by his linguistic constructions, as the very construct of each sentence became a maze, (2) listened to and appreciated, and (3) inspired and focused?

Randy didn't like conflict. And he loved teaching.

He loved work, the intricate discipline of thought, the webbed jig of creating structures.

He seemed to revel in what most of us struggle with—the abundant demands of a packed and complex daily life. He lit up when letting you know that he was leaving the office to go to Sophia or Oliver's school for a meeting or to pick one of them up. He filled with palpable delight and a kind of awe when he talked about Ginger's past dance glory and current family medical practice.

I never detected worry.

I never detected condescension.

I never detected lack of hope. Or cynicism.

He wrote numerous books, spoke at a zillion conferences, helped guide committees and projects, all with acumen, grace, and the constant surprise of his brilliance. And from where I stand, what he created, with a group of visionary, dedicated artists/scholars/activists, what became and is still becoming NYU's Tisch School of the Arts' Department of Art and Public Policy and the Master in Arts Politics program, constitutes a singular legacy. APP is a kind of academic renga, a poem connecting voices across time, place, language, practice, and experience, grounded in a love of form and readiness to disrupt form, complex and surprising, muscular and lyrical, necessary and also patient in its urgency.

I keep learning from Randy. Every day. In his books, in his words, which resonate in my head or are quoted by alumni or colleagues, and as I experience the unfolding of what he so masterfully envisioned and developed.

I will be forever grateful to him. I don't weep thinking of him, although now and then I think all of us at APP get weepy when we conjure him. Mostly I smile and try to gather and employ even a tiny fraction of the focused and critical optimism he emanated, to continue the work. Like good medicine, Randy's gifts keep working in us, through us, and around us.

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