

Imagining a Different RNC

BROOKLYN RAIL CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

Even while crammed into a booth in an 8th Avenue diner, Chris Wangro, between bites of his bagel and poached egg, gives good interview. Wangro, executive co-producer of the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues and Ideas, has had a lot of practice. Director of the city's Parks and Recreation Department's special events for six and a half years, he has been in charge of a long list of unwieldy occasions, including the 1995 Papal Mass in Central Park and last fall's 100,000 person Freedom Ride Immigrant Rally.



Elephant illustration by Ju Rifka.

The Imagine Festival will open on August 28th at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. The weeklong coalition of more than 100 venues, artists and performers, is planned as a platform for the voices of New York's arts community during the clamor of the RNC. Wangro explains that the not-for-profit festival is intended as a "third space," an alternative to traditional left-right sound-bite politics. Instead of pushing a specific political agenda, the organizers hope to draw on New York's creativity to spur open discussion and fresh debate on the issues.

The idea for the Imagine Festival grew from a one-off event called "Arts on the High Wire" in 2002. Wangro was one of several producers involved in bringing together New York's arts community in support of the city's arts organizations that were badly hit by 9/11. "It was a time in which billions of dollars were being promised to New York by the government, but no money was being targeted for the not-for-profit organizations," says Wangro. "As many people did, we pulled ourselves together and did something."

The Imagine Festival began to take shape as soon as the organizers of Arts on the High Wire heard that the RNC would be coming to New York. Wangro recalls that "we saw it as an incredible opportunity to speak out from the cultural capital of this country. We decided to bring together the broadest cross-section of the New York arts community and provide a forum and place" for people to put forth their views.

Although he supports the rallies and marches that are planned for the RNC, Wangro is keen to emphasize that the Imagine festival has a different agenda. "The arts are traditionally about understanding and deciphering culture, framing questions and thinking on the issues," says Wangro. As a result, each of the festival's six days will feature a different theme—freedom, community, democracy, justice, prosperity and the future. Daily panel discussions that correspond to each of the themes will be held at The New School, CUNY, the Asia Society and in public libraries throughout the city. True to the spirit of open discussion, there are plans to host a debate on environmental issues between Friends of the Earth and members of Republican and corporate think tanks.

The festival will sponsor everything from opera to large-scale street theater in venues across the city that range from the Jewish Community Center to the Knitting Factory. Fringe acts will run alongside well-known names like comedian Margaret Cho and Marc Anthony Thompson of Chocolate Genius Inc., who bookend the festival at the Apollo Theater. Although the individual partners are members of the festival coalition, they will fund events from their own resources. How much the venues and performers decide to charge for events will remain at their own discretion.

The Imagine festival's strategy of engaging venues and performance spaces not only provides space for this more meditative work, but it also sidesteps attempts by the city to quash dissent. If the city doesn't own the space, Bloomberg and company can't withhold a permit.

Wangro's former position as the city's director of special events gives him particular insight into the issue. "We knew right away that we weren't going to get the parks, that we're not going to get the streets," he says. "We wanted to be masters of our own forum, and we didn't want to expend all our energy fighting the city for spaces, so we went ahead and created a coalition of venues."

One festival piece that will occupy the streets, though, is "The Freedom of Expression Monument." Its title is suitably verbose—the monument is a giant, orange, 20-foot tall working megaphone. It will be set up in Foley Square and directed at the federal courts as part sculpture and part performance art. As people wander past, they will be able to climb a ramp up to the aperture and bellow a piece of their mind.

And, whether on stage or in the streets, in the words of Gunter Grass, "The job of a citizen is to keep your mouth open."