

## 2. YOU GOTTA BE KIDDING ME

### *The Serious Activity of Socially Engaged Art*

**You've worked as a teaching artist for almost four decades. Tell me a little about how it all began. Were there any specific events or political movements that helped to convince you that you needed to engage yourself actively both as an artist and an educator?**

As the granddaughter of immigrants who were seeking refuge from poverty and pogroms in Eastern Europe, I was supposed to live out the American dream and choose an upwardly mobile career. I was being pointed towards something in the world of science that would lead to a lucrative occupation. At the end of my senior year, my high school art teacher asked which art school I had chosen to go to. I responded impulsively, "You've gotta be kidding me; no way, I'm going to do something serious with my life!" That snide remark has served as an illustration for my students for many years. What does it mean to live in a culture that constantly instills the attitude that the arts are frivolous?

In truth, my values were and continue to be quite counter-culture. Participating in the 'rat race' was something I sneered at, like a good number of my generation did. I could see the immense contradictions of the status quo early on, and wanted little to do with upward mobility. Living simply and collectively, and doing something that served others, seemed a much saner way to be present in the world.

Social engagement was a family tradition. I was taught to think critically about what I was learning in school and to question authority. We went to antiwar marches, signed petitions and canvased for progressive candidates. Whether organising for the local: changing the girl's dress code in high school, or against the bombing of Cambodia, I experienced my nascent activism as functional and effective much of the time. When our progressive candidate (Eugene McCarthy) lost, my father would remind me that we were part of a river of activists and that victories emerging from the grass roots might take generations of organising. Although I was inspired by all the burgeoning movements of that time, I could also see how progressive groups fragmented, factionalised and sometimes became dogmatic. All of this was discouraging to my idealistic self so I stepped away from outright activism during my first years in college and chose a more inward path of self-exploration and reflection.

As my high school art teacher had observed, I had developed an addiction for using art to make sense of both my inner and outer chaos. All through my childhood I had used art as a way to process my feelings. I was considered an 'overly' sensitive

kid who spent a lot of time alone stringing together words, images, stories, sounds and gestures to express a whole world of fantasy, but mostly angst: the alienation of growing up in the land of shopping malls, being dark-skinned and different in the world of whiteness and freaking out about nuclear war. Encountering *Echo of a Scream* by David Alfaro Siquieros in the Museum of Modern Art was one of those “aha” moments; here was an artist who understood how to convey the shadows of a world that most people choose not to look at. I was mesmerised by his truth telling.

I first began to understand the power of pedagogy to transform people in high school. I observed two dynamic teachers, one who taught poetry and theatre and brought emotionally wounded young people out of their shells, and the other, a former marine and football coach, who had the courage to teach the reality of the Vietnam war, and helped students run a teach-in after the bombing of Cambodia. Both were great risk-takers and role models for me.

In college, I studied with Paul Wellstone, when he was a young activist. I was beginning to think it was the norm to have social justice advocates as teachers. It was a surprise when I encountered the opposite, and ironically that often happened in the art classes. Some explicit episodes with sexism in the latter threw me back into the ring of activism. One of my male professors thought he was flattering me when he said that I could be “the one” female art student who could make it in the “boy’s club.” He suggested that the other female students would become good art collectors once they had married well. His insults (and he thought he was praising me) were startling to me, but the timing couldn’t have been better. One of my female peers had a connection to the new feminist art programme at CalArts and we were able to access some of their resources. Our college had very few female professors (the art department had none) and our art history lectures made it appear that only white men made art. So we occupied the department chairman’s office and made our demands known: women faculty, our own exhibition space, female visiting artists, etc. As a result, we had a festival of women’s art and performances, the art history lectures gradually changed and women faculty were hired. Two visiting feminist artists gave us a dose of a dogmatic approach to feminist art, and we thankfully had the good sense not to follow that narrow path. Every one of us went on to become serious, practising artists, all shaping feminism into something truly liberatory. And none of us married “well”, at least not in the sense that my teacher had imagined.

In graduate school, a theory-based, conceptual approach to art-making was dominant at the time. I was introduced to the writings of Ivan Illich, Paolo Freire, John Berger and Neil Postman and began my journey into how key questions could be brought into the classroom to raise consciousness. In post-graduate school I explored feminist and race theory and bell hooks’ writings on pedagogy became an important piece of my tool kit.

As a result, I could not conform to teaching art in the traditional ways (technical exercises, lessons in western aesthetics and current trends in the art world). Instead students developed projects, often collaborative ones, where they deconstructed myths, questioned stereotypes and assumptions and told their own stories.

As a teaching artist in NYC museums I had lots of practice in “teaching art as a subversive activity”. My students were encouraged to ask questions about the work they saw on the walls, not just what does this work mean, but who is this art for and what stories were being told about whom? We talked about privilege, who has it and who doesn’t, and how does one claim one’s values in a culture that tries to erase them. Similarly, once I had arrived in academia, I experimented with many different strategies to help students find their voices while learning about social issues that impacted their lives. My summers teaching at the Institute for Social Ecology, training with Augusto Boal of the Theatre of the Oppressed, and teaching for Goddard College (with its John Dewey-influenced, learner-based pedagogical model) in their newly founded MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts also gave me many new strategies for working with students.

A most recent fusion of my art and teaching practices has taken place over the past dozen years at UW Tacoma, where I was invited twelve years ago to “teach whatever I want” with interdisciplinary majors and non-traditional public university students. More about this later...

**Lucy R. Lippard has written that she admires your “commitment to an alternative path to teaching art and social justice without contradictions”. What kinds of contradictions do you think she was referring to? Can we—indeed, should we—avoid contradictions in education and artistic practice?**

I believe that Lucy is referring to the contradictions of the marketplace and what it means to be an artist in this time of late Capitalism, without playing the game of galleries, dealers and being beholden to the whims of status-driven collectors. I briefly tasted that experience when my practice was young. With the mentorship of a few older artists, I explored the activist margins of the NYC art world, went to openings, met peers and exhibited in many group shows – most of them in alternative spaces, but a few in museums. I was lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time with the right thing and got some recognition.

Articles about my work in *Art Forum*, *Art in America* and the *NY Times*, felt like too much attention, too soon, since I was in my mid-20s at the time. I was unprepared for the competitive energy it stirred up from others. I felt untested and not at all wise – I did not yet understand the ageism of the art world and how it eats its young. I saw the opportunism, ego-stroking needs and pretensions up close and it felt bone-deep wrong, given the intentions I had for my work. With the world appearing to head towards nuclear war (and many other disasters that were accelerated during those Reagan years), the act of sipping cocktails at fancy art parties with people discussing their real estate deals just didn’t make sense or appeal to me. Some artists I respect deeply have had a greater tolerance for those contradictions and both they and their work appear to not have suffered for it. I was not very resilient or mature, and thankfully had both the instinct and opportunity to leave so that I could grow in the ways I wanted and needed to.

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An artist ‘friend’ told me that by leaving NYC at that moment when my career was clearly blossoming would essentially throw all my gains in the trash; she said it would be like falling off the edge. So I let myself fall and the further I got from the hubbub of the art world, the less I heard its siren call.

Once I was in Los Angeles, the marketplace’s shadow could not compete with the lively alternative art scene there. I had no shortage of venues for my work and intellectually engaging peers. The only compromise in staying there was the challenge to my health.

Things are quite different here in Seattle where socially engaged and feminist art practices are not as commonplace because they have not been taught (LA had the Woman’s Building spawning a couple of generations of practitioners). This distinction has encouraged me to make my studio a place for gathering peers in monthly discussion groups and to find interdisciplinary allies outside of the local arts community while I build an audience for my projects. I also maintain a fruitful dialogue with artists, teachers and activists all over the world through my ‘Arts for Change’ Facebook page and several other online discussion groups.

The neoliberal explosion of the art marketplace during the last few decades has become repulsive to many artists who discover early on that the whims of the industry have little to do with the depth or merit of their art. Some younger artists are choosing the entrepreneurial model to survive, creating businesses and becoming freelance public artists while others are joining collectives and developing permeable egos so that they can collaborate well, create stronger projects and offer each other support. Some of us older artists are choosing to do the same.

**You are frequently involved in educational projects in which the word ‘change’ features prominently. At the University of Washington Tacoma as well as in the workshops you conduct at your Seattle studio and the Facebook page you mentioned, you talk about “arts for change”. What does change mean to you? Are artistic changes as relevant or important as political changes? Is it possible that the notion of change within educational contexts becomes too prescriptive beyond a certain point?**

Frankly the word “change” has almost become a cliché for me, especially since the word was co-opted by political candidates to imply “support me, I’ll give you what you want” and then, lo and behold, we received more of the same. I wish there was another word to describe the evolution in thinking and acting that needs to happen. “Transformation” could be that word if it didn’t have similar baggage. But I don’t want to get stuck in the semantics.

The truth is that we need art that really shifts people out of denial, to help them grasp more deeply what is happening to the planet right now. We need art that allows people to grieve, feel less isolated and dream the future we want. And all of that means changing gears, changing perspective and seeing what’s under the surface. Our American public has been so dumbed down by the media and an educational

system that was damaged by defunding, standardised tests and more. This process was started with the neoliberal agenda ushered in by Reagan and subsequent administrations.

As suggested earlier, I believe that all art has a politics, so the two merge in my mind. Can art create legislative change? Perhaps if it touches people so deeply that a grassroots movement emerges and it pressures those in power to change policies. One form of art that has the potential to do that is interactive, community-based work – when people are moved by a story to tell their own, that's when I've seen people actually shift a fixed position. Being heard and seen creates an unexpected momentum.

Within the classroom one cannot predict what changes will occur, especially if you are really engaged in a radical form of pedagogy. So I don't consider this prescriptive, quite the opposite. You can set an intention (we will make art about the ecological crisis), provide a context (in this moment in time, with these tools and concepts) and resources (with these readings, experiences, understandings of history and materials), but where the students go with that, both individually and collectively cannot be prescribed and, in fact, shouldn't be.

**What I find compelling about what you say is that you have communicated your ideas about art, feminism and social change in many different contexts: from formal classrooms to museums and even community-based projects. How does your relationship with your audience change when you shift your teacher's/activist's location?**

First it's important to find out where we are located in relation to the context that we are working in. We do the research to find out who our audience might be, and look at how to create connection with them through shared concerns, questions and stories. Once we've found those places, we look to find common ground or experiences. Learning how to listen to who is in the room and discover how differently they might perceive things has helped me open up my heart rather than shut down and carry prejudices into spaces where it would inhibit dialogue or provoke some kind of cultural imperialism to occur.

**How would you say your own practice as an artist has changed over the years? Were there any significant events, political milestones or authors whose work influenced such changes?**

Moving multiple times across the continent for reasons that were both economic and health-related has had a big impact on my practice. I never planned to be this nomadic, but it has given me the gift of cohorts and networks in many places and a decidedly 'un-provincial' point of view. With each move, I've had to start from scratch in a new community and that has been both humbling and hard work. This experience echoes something I practise in the studio: I sometimes avoid the things that I do well



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Figure 4. Beverly Naidus, *So Uncomfortable*, a culture jammed image from the series *Other: Breaking Out of the Box*, 2001

so that I can be in that uncomfortable, exciting and beginner's place where I know nothing. The 'mistakes' yielded by these experiments offer an antidote to smugness and often send me in productive directions. The gift of being invisible in a new context offers time for research, deep internal reflection, stream of consciousness drawing and photography, improvisation with materials and just putting everything on pause. Eventually, when new cohorts arrive, I get to collaborate and brainstorm with a new team, make a new home for my work, and develop a renewed sense of purpose.

As I've aged, I've witnessed and experienced so many challenges including those caused by economic limitations, patriarchy, racism and unhealthy environments (neoliberal academic institutions and polluted air, water, etc.), but despite all these issues I've been very lucky and privileged. I can make art and write about these challenges, and find audiences who resonate with my questions and experiences. My media seem to change often, although I always return to words, photos, mixed media drawings, improvisations with found objects and interactive installations.



*Figure 5. Beverly Naidus, Eden Reframed: An Ecological and Community Art Project, 2011, eco-art inspired by permaculture design, Vashon Island, WA*

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Over time, I've developed more efficient, portable forms (digital ones as well as objects that roll or fold up and easily fit in boxes) or ones that take root and yield harvests, like my eco-art project on Vashon Island.

Being unexpectedly evicted from several studios on my current campus required me to be enormously resilient and adaptable. I began working more outside, studied permaculture design and created *Eden Reframed* on Vashon Island, WA. The lack of significant work space also catalysed the writer in me, and my book, *Arts for Change: Teaching Outside the Frame* (New Village Press, 2009) emerged.

Wonderful writers of speculative fiction and revisionist histories have strengthened my resolve to tell different stories about the future and the past: Ruth Ozeki, Ursula LeGuin, Marge Piercy, Octavia Butler, Barbara Kingsolver, Starhawk, Doris Lessing, Margaret Atwood, Ernest Callenbach, Leslie Marmon Silko, Kim Stanley Robinson and Rebecca Solnit.

There are spiritual roots to much of my socially engaged work. They come from different traditions. Joanna Macy, a Buddhist teacher and environmental and anti-nuclear activist helped me transform my despair and cynicism about the future into art that might inspire action. Due to her influence, my installation about nuclear nightmares, *THIS IS NOT A TEST* became more explicitly interactive. Joanna often speaks about our relationship to "future beings." Our new collective, ARTifACTs is imagining our descendants in *We Almost Didn't Make It: An Illuminated and Participatory Manuscript from the Future*.

Doing grief rituals with Sobonfu Some of the Dagara people gave me a deeper understanding of how to work with personal and collective grief as part of "Curtain Call: Portable Altars for Grief and Gratitude." Thich Nhat Hanh led a retreat for activist artists where I was given tools for being present, using my art for healing and more. Meditation practices, yoga, sweat lodge ceremonies, dream work and earth-based rituals all have offered me spiritual nourishment and added to my art practice.

Here in Seattle, my dance community has given me a space in which to express things that I can't say with words or images; they taught me about "contact improvisation" – a concept that I have taken into the studio, creating balance and tension between objects, dreams, textures, ideas, colours and feelings.

My husband, Bob Spivey, who aside from being an extraordinary partner and stalwart activist, scholar, poet and a lay Buddhist monk, introduced me to social ecology and the many passionate activists, scholars and teachers from the Institute for Social Ecology.

#### **What kind of role, if any, do your own works as an artist play in your teaching methods?**

When I was invited to teach at UW Tacoma they told me I could teach whatever I wanted. Given that it is an interdisciplinary programme without the resources for a conventional art department, I wanted to experiment with teaching art thematically rather than from the medium, allowing content to determine the forms. Students



share the stories about the topic in various media (everything from digital art, artists' books, performance and site-specific installations). They learn to think critically about the issues discussed and the art that they research with similar content. They develop skills with visual grammar to make their work as compelling as possible. They learn about process-based work, collaboration and how to use art as an intervention in everyday life. In every class they keep journals where they are encouraged to take risks with materials and ideas, vent about the course content and brainstorm projects.



Figure 6. Beverly Naidus, Homage to the Paris Climate Talks: An Eco-art Class Action, University of Washington, Tacoma, D10, 2015 (Photo: Eunice Min)

Each course is based on the themes within major bodies of my own work. In other words, *THIS IS NOT A TEST* inspired my 'Art in a Time of War' class. Given my concerns about continuing wars, the high suicide rates among veterans, and the amnesia and ignorance about the causes and histories of war, I felt this course was ideal for our student body, many who are vets or grew up in military families, in a community surrounded by military bases. There are also a sizeable number of students who come from families who are refugees from war-torn areas. My artist's book, *One Size DOES NOT Fit All*, provoked my 'Body Image and Art' class. Decades of work about environmental issues inspired my 'Eco-Art' course. Coming to terms with my identity as a person of colour, raised to be white, and making work about those issues encouraged my class in 'Cultural Identity and Art'. 'Labour, Globalisation and Art' emerged from my installations about unemployment and nine-to-five life, as well as

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my work as an activist within the global justice movement. ‘The Artist as Visionary and Dreamer’ was inspired by my work in dream groups, as well as my long history of making art about dreams and nightmares and my desire to help students imagine a world quite different from Hollywood’s dystopian futurism. The latter passion was influenced by my years teaching at the Institute for Social Ecology, where I learned about reconstructive visions of the future, again not prescriptive ones, but ones that will help people imagine the future we want.

Working within academia at an underfunded state institution, with a constantly changing administration, has had many limitations but I am grateful for the freedom I have in the classroom and take full advantage of it. We do meditation, read and watch materials that are critical of racial, gender and class oppression and work with community collaborators like the Washington State Labor Council. Artists from the networks I’ve created around the world have arrived in the classroom, including visits this year from the Beehive Design Collective and Bread and Puppet Theater. I experience my work with students much like facilitating a ten-week, community-based art project.

Hopefully in the next year or two our major, Arts in Context, will be approved and the curriculum we have developed over the past 12 years will be used to train students to develop art projects in a wide variety of community contexts. In my Seattle studio, I am teaching workshops, modified versions of my content-based courses to a diverse group of adult learners. The goal is to seed cohorts who connect with a wide spectrum of socially engaged art practices and see what emerges.