

Outside the Frame: Teaching a Socially Engaged Art Practice

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This is a story of not being satisfied with what was expected. It is a story about filling in the blanks that were left by a public education system eviscerated by the McCarthy Era in the U.S. It is a story about a painstaking search for role models in histories that weren't taught. It is a story about discovering how art can get under the skin more deeply than any political speech. It is a story of stepping away from what one thinks one knows, and opening the door for students to teach.

*This story starts with a confluence of events, but I can't say which one was the most significant. Was it the twinkle in my father's eye when he spoke about standing on soapboxes in Union Square in New York City in the 1930's – a place where he found his voice, when the scheduled speaker did not show up, to speak about the injustices of fascism? Was the passion born in summer camp, where so many of us, children of immigrants' children, belted out socially conscious folksongs while sitting around campfires? Or perhaps it all started when I was seven as I sat in what became a favorite room in the **old** version of the Museum of Modern Art, before it became an art department store. In that favorite room were paintings that offered spaces of truth I hadn't seen before. Among them were David Alfaro Siquieros's **Echo of a Scream** and Pavel Tchelitchew's **Hide and Seek**. I was transported into complex worlds filled with something quite unlike the picket-fenced facades found in suburban U.S.A.*

But perhaps more importantly than my assorted individual experiences, this story has to do with being born into a time where so many of us were asking questions and confronting the status quo. I was eagerly caught up in that generational whirlwind, yet another cycle in the movement for social change. Somehow it seemed like the mass of us taking part in anti-war protests, feminist support groups, and civil rights actions, were part of a huge force, a tidal wave that would change society for the better. In the midst of this, I chose art, or perhaps it chose me, as a way to process my confusion and make sense of my fears about the world. In the terrain granted by the Muse, I found the freedom to vent, challenge, and call forth uncensored a range of thoughts and feelings disallowed in my neatly mowed, hemmed and tucked New Jersey town. Early on I saw art making as a path to power and knowledge, and as a juicy, uninhibited way to find community and create dialog. This path was not encouraged in my upwardly mobile family who wanted me to do something "serious" with my life. But my ambition was not frivolous; I did not want to become a wall decorator for the rich, but rather I saw the potential for an awesome cultural revolution.

Breaking the Trance: Deconstructing an Art Education

Scene 1 – A New Jersey suburb of New York City in the late Sixties. The art room in our high school was a safe space. The teacher promoted free expression while giving us the standard, but mostly unconscious dose of Late Modernist doctrine: “universal” aesthetic values and a belief in the idea of genius. I was not his genius, but the approval I received for my paintings, images that vented my teenage angst, helped reinforce my very tentative path towards a life in the arts.

Scene 2: The Art Students League, New York City. My Saturday morning ritual of taking the bus into the city aroused worried looks from my high school peers who were taking the same bus to the local malls. This was not the first suggestion I had received that studying art, especially in an urban setting where you might get dangerous ideas, could be seen as threatening to suburban U.S. values. When I first sat down to draw, heard the buzz of students around me and inhaled the pungent smell of oil paint and turpentine, I was sure that I had come home. The sensuality of that moment resonated for years to come, each time signifying a deep desire for risk-taking, expression, communion, and recognition.

Scene 3: Summer of 1974 in Provincetown, Massachusetts. There were at least 30 of us, young and ambitious painting students, squeezed into a steamy, fume-filled studio listening to our teachers drone on and on about the merits of one painting over another. Both trained by the Abstract Expressionist, Hans Hoffman, these teachers placed the highest value on images that had no representational residue and no clear meaning. Allowing my stream of consciousness to flow was liberating, but the personal iconography that emerged from our work spoke to a very small audience and ultimately did not speak to me. Every day I was having a raw confrontation with class issues as I cleaned the beach houses of the rich. I swam both figuratively, and literally, in the sea of Provincetown’s blossoming gay culture. And the art I made had no clear connection with my life.

Scene 4: Fall of 1974 at a small liberal arts college in Minnesota. Some of the male art teachers were attempting to groom me as their “queen bee,” setting me apart from the other female art students as the one who might actually become a producing artist, rather than a consumer of culture: “most of these girls will marry well and, if we do our job well, they will decorate their homes with our work.” Perhaps it was the time, or the fact that we had no female teachers and few female role models in the art history lectures. We decided that we had had enough of this patronizing arrogance, and put our collective feet down. We talked late into the night, revolted en masse and asked for our own budget. Then we brought in feminist visiting artists, hung our own exhibits, worked collaboratively and began to question everything we had learned. Maybe painting our own stories was not a bad thing to be doing. The status quo art world said that what we had in mind was “therapy,” but we didn’t care what they thought. We would not be satisfied with anything less than a cultural revolution.

Scene 5: Fall of 1976 at graduate school in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I was a teaching assistant in a beginning painting class. Over twenty students, mostly young, were spread out at easels and walls, each working quietly and intensely on paintings of all different sizes, shapes and materials. I watched the instructor slowly move around the room, engaging in private conversations with each student. When I listened in, I heard her ask them questions about their art practices; what were they struggling with in this painting, who were the artists that inspired them, when did they know when a painting

was finished, and so on. In a few cases the questions became quite personal. There was a strange intimacy about the dialog, as if the instructor was facilitating a therapy session.

Much more intensely personal than my experience in Provincetown, I wondered if this was the new way to teach a studio art class. Whether in private conversation or in group critiques, the discussions revolved around each individual, his or her search for meaning in form, and the odd obsessions that defined their vision. Art seemed to be made by these students without any social context other than the art world. It was assumed that all the students felt alienated from society; after all, wasn't that why they were in an art school in the first place? But with that fate, came no social responsibility.

Although I was only beginning my research on this topic, I saw this attitude as the legacy of McCarthyism and the “art for art's sake” ideology of Late Modernism. I had grown up in a family where doing work of social value was both implicit and explicit. Despite suffering economically during the Black lists of the Fifties, my parents raised me to be a socially concerned person and to contribute my skills to make a difference in the world. This upbringing made me quite uncomfortable with an art practice that seemed to manifest totally as an upwardly mobile lifestyle or as a black clad, bohemian pose.

The Reconstruction Begins

The questions that went unasked by that graduate school instructor became a wellspring for me: *why* were the students making art, who did they feel was their *audience*, what were their *intentions*? Did they aspire to have their names in the trendy art magazines or in art history books, or did they want to speak their truth with no goal of fortune or fame. During that first year in graduate school I was blessed with an insightful studio mate and fellow graduate student, Bruce Barber (a conceptual artist from New Zealand), with whom I could have long conversations about these questions and the purpose of art. Soon I was reading John Berger, Walter Benjamin, Ernest Fischer, Arnold Hauser, Paul Von Blum, Lucy Lippard and many of the early feminist art writers who could be found in the inspiring, but now defunct, *Heresies Magazine*. I discovered that political art had a long history, beginning with the broad sheets produced by peasant revolutionaries during the Middle Ages, and that the tradition of using art to tell stories of injustice was well rooted, if submerged, in Western Culture.

As a result of living in Canada and having the world news filtered in a profoundly different way, I began to question more and more of my assumptions. I developed a fresh socio-political perspective that I had not been privy to in the U.S. At the same time, I was asking myself why I was making art and for whom, and so, without much hesitation, my process of art making began to shift. The cryptic symbols that had emerged as abstract marks from my brushes were replaced by lines of text, typewritten on translucent paper. Each scrap of paper dangled like a price tag from bare hangers, exclaiming “Buy One Now!” and “You Need This!” My angst-ridden search for a private iconography was being transformed into a quirky sense of humor about the contradictions in everyday life. A pair of white pants was lightly cartooned on paper; a small red dot of paint placed politely on the crotch. Scrawled across the top was “the wrong day to wear white pants.”

Slowly I found images and words that could *communicate* my increasing sense of urgency about the state of the world and my place within it. I learned how to use art as a tool for

consciousness raising and as a way to invite others to share their stories. I began to make site-specific, audio installations about my nightmares about nuclear war, my frustration with consumerism, and my questions about standard notions of success and middle class propriety. When my pieces were effective they provoked an unexpected response and reward: audience members would offer me stories about their own lives, including their nightmares and dreams for the future.

Visitors to my audio installation, **THIS IS NOT A TEST**, that depicted the dwelling and inner voices of the last survivor of a nuclear war, were provoked to tell me stories about their terror during the Cuban Missile Crisis and their cynical responses to the official phrase “duck and cover.” They talked about being numb and wondered how many missiles were targeted in our direction at that moment. I was amazed that my art had triggered such a generous outpouring of stories and began to see how art had the potential to turn what I thought were my personal anxieties into collective concerns. I was developing my artistic voice at the same time that feminist art was becoming visible as a movement. Within the context of that movement, personal story was profoundly important, especially as it referred to the politics of oppression. Along with the experience of gender politics, I began to see how economic class, cultural identity, geography, sexual orientation, and age could influence or frame an artist’s point of view. As a teacher, I wanted to share these discoveries with others.

I assumed that there might be a few other students who had been affected deeply by the liberation movements of the sixties and seventies (civil rights, anti-war, feminism, gay rights, self-realization, etc.) and who might be searching for a different path as an artist and looking for support.

My last semester in graduate school (1978) I had the opportunity to create my own course and to find some of those students who wanted to explore different approaches to art making. The course focused on the assumptions we have about the world, by looking at the meanings and connotations of “loaded” words. I had just finished reading *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner (1969). These two educators questioned an outmoded educational system that was not keeping up with the rate of change in our world. They offered new strategies for critical thinking that might give our society tools for confronting the problems that were and are threatening its survival. Their approach to making the classroom relevant by addressing political and social issues included a discussion of the shifting meanings of language. By focusing on the connotations and denotations of words, they exposed a method for examining the underlying values and assumptions of a culture. I wanted to expand their approach to critical thinking and relevance by adding images into the equation.

We started with the word “exotic.” A loaded word to be sure. It was a particular favorite of mine because I had often been given that label (because of my dark skin, eyes, and hair) by well-meaning acquaintances. The students jumped into interpreting this word visually, producing a wide variety of artistic forms—from photocollage to painting to found object sculptures—to illustrate their meanings. We had a wonderful debate about which meaning was the “right” or “correct” meaning of the word, what it means to be considered an outsider or an “other,” and what it means to make art to communicate meaning. As the course progressed, students chose their own provocative words and we brainstormed ways to share what we had learned with a larger audience. During the final week of the course, we had a public exhibition and dialog about what it means to make art with a particular intention: in this case, to communicate meanings and look at the implications of those meanings in the broader society.

Whose Culture has Value?

After leaving graduate school I returned to New York City and found work, teaching art in several museums. Every three months we would focus on one section of the museum, for example: The American Wing, the African Collection, or the Twentieth Century painting galleries. I knew from the moment I was hired that I was not going to follow the party line, offering the “disadvantaged” and “culturally deprived” an experience of “high” culture. I was looking for a new strategy to make art in the museum relevant to my students, a strategy that would help the students develop critical thinking about the world, and give the students more awareness of their values. My supervisor gave me a great opportunity: I could address the content of the collections in any way I saw fit and I could develop whatever kinds of art projects that I felt were relevant to my focus.

The students came from public high schools all over the five boroughs and were mostly the children of the working poor and the lower middleclass. I worked with the students at their schools for several sessions and at the museum twice. During one of my school visits we looked at advertising as a visual and social message and discussed the values that ads promote. We wrote lists of what we were being sold, aside from the product. From that list we were able to explore how the students’ values contrasted with what Madison Avenue was promoting. In all cases, the contrast between the slick and manicured glossy magazine ads and the student’s personal lives and communities was extreme. They could see quite clearly how the ads made them feel badly about their lives, and how ads intended to make them buy products in order to feel *better*. Developing this kind of critical thinking was key to my process with them.

We also had long discussions about what they valued in their communities and cultures and whether they saw those values displayed on the walls of museums or in advertising. Our talks generated images and ideas about genuine needs and concerns, rather than ones the students felt they were supposed to have – based on what they saw in popular or “high” culture. We also looked at slides of art that raised questions about the world, which spoke to the truth of what it means to suffer and struggle, and that provided visions of better life.

The student art that emerged from all of this talk was multifaceted. They created paper machè masks that expressed the individual student’s power. The masks were used to make plays about the community’s stories and local hidden history. They designed ads to promote each individual student’s strengths and talents. They made paintings of their dreams and nightmares. Some looked at the ways the crises in the economy and the environment were affecting their local communities. At the end of each semester, the schools were invited to display the student work at the museum for one evening and were given a special reception for this event.

While this series of workshops did little to subvert the museum environment, it certainly raised many questions for the students about how culture is transmitted and whose culture is given more visibility and why. During the five years I taught in NYC museums, I not only asked students to notice how little of the work on the walls was made by women and artists of color, but I encouraged them to find new venues for their self and community expressions.

At that time, NYC was filled with all kinds of alternative art spaces and collectives of artists doing socially engaged art. I participated in several activist artist groups whose collaborative projects

on gentrification, reproductive rights for women, and nuclear issues entered the public realm in new ways – as site-specific installations, performance art, interactive carnivals, billboard correction, “subvertizing” and other forms of street art. This was an exciting time and a desperate time. There was no shortage of subject matter for an activist artist. Reagan was the president; the Cold War appeared to be on the verge of HOT. The economy had shifted dramatically, with housing costs becoming exorbitant. The ecosystem was rapidly falling apart.

Still the huge shadow cast by the New York art market and the financial stresses most of us were encountering forced many of us to make choices. Some chose to promote their ideas through the mainstream gallery context, some found grants to work with communities as cultural animators, and others found educational contexts in which to promote their vision for social change.

Shifting the Discourse within the Ivory Tower

I was among the latter group and left NYC in the mid-Eighties to teach art at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. It was a time of ivory tower insulation with little visible student activism. Many students were focused on securing glamorous and lucrative careers and didn't want to be bothered with uncomfortable social issues. I remember being asked by a sarcastic student, “what are you gonna paint out here in the middle of the cornfields?” So I went back to the studio and painted the cornfields down the road, with nuclear missiles sleeping in underground bunkers ready and waiting for red alert phone calls. I painted the empty farms with “for sale” signs hanging on the barns, decorated with symbols of mourning for the farmers committing suicide left and right. There was no shortage of subject matter for anyone paying attention.

Despite the dominant feelings of apathy on campus, there were many young students who had a strong social conscience, and some of them found their way into my classes. Some were working to end apartheid in South Africa, some were trying to heal from dysfunctional family life, and some were looking to understand the epidemic of eating disorders among their peers. While it was important to share with these strongly motivated students how art could be part of their vision for social change, I also felt a sense of mission to awaken other students who seemed asleep at the wheel. Most of my assignments offered opportunities for students to find their personal voice, a voice that was informed by the place where they grew up, the economic class of their family, their cultural heritage, their age, and many other factors. While strengthening their sense of artistic voice, the students could also broaden their understanding of their place in the world.

Using a social frame, the simple choice of placing objects in a “still life” had larger implications. Where did the objects come from? What natural resources were used to make them? Who labored to fabricate them and how much were they paid? Who purchased these objects and how were they used in their new home? What meaning did the student derive from each object in their new context and how did this social lens expand the meaning? And how could we reveal these meanings in the actual art piece and communicate them to a less aware audience?

When painting a landscape, could we observe the effects of development, farming practices, and ecological stresses on that landscape? How could we find an appropriate art form to share those revelations or concerns with an uninformed public?

And so on. Every formal tradition of teaching art could be analyzed and reconstructed using this lens, from assumptions made about the study of the figure and its objectification of the body to the cultural imperialism often implicit in art history classes.

Engaging students in this kind of question asking was the only way I found it comfortable to sit in academia. During my two-year appointment at this college and my subsequent nine years teaching “New Genres and Intermedia” at a state university in southern California, I kept challenging the standard curriculum, trying to find ways to make my art classes reveal more about the world. Not surprisingly, this questioning made some of my colleagues quite uncomfortable. I saw this discomfort as healthy, giving us all the opportunity to grow. It was heartening to see some of my more adventurous colleagues shift their practice and research to include a more socially conscious perspective.

Action/Research as a Strategy for Social Change

As time passed, I felt I needed more tools and role models to offer my students. After attending several national meetings of the Alliance for Cultural Democracy, an organization of artists who made their socially engaged art specifically within community rather than in the studio, I was inspired to offer my students new strategies for making art. Many ACD members saw themselves as cultural or community animators, artists who facilitate a creative process *within* the community rather than as artists making pieces *for* communities or directing the communities to make work based on the artist’s vision. With this new insight, I encouraged my students to work collaboratively and to find new public contexts for their art.

When my students were designing a public art project, we would discuss the various strategies available to us. Would we create “plop art” that had no relationship to the community, but had everything to do with our individual vision? Would we attend public meetings that gave us some notion of community concerns and then shape those ideas into an art piece of our own design? Would we invite specific communities to paint or perform in pieces of our design? Or would we bring our skills into the community and offer them up, encouraging the community members to collaborate with us and make the art about their lives?

In the summer of 1993 I had the opportunity to study cultural animation with founding members of the exciting and well-established community arts organization, Jubilee Arts that has been based in West Bromwich, England since 1974. Jubilee, now known as “The Public,”⁽¹⁾ is one of several groups that have given definition through their work to a kind of socially engaged art practice known as cultural/ community animation. As the brilliant cultural activist and poet, Charles Frederick, theorizes

“cultural/community animation means to revitalize the soul, the subjective and objective, collective and personally experienced identity of a community in historical or immediate crisis. Using a plethora of art and performance forms, the community gathers in all of its internal diversity with autonomous democratic authority to explore critically its social and historical existence. The product of this cultural work is for the community to create new consciousness of itself and a renovated narrative of its imagination of itself in history expressed in a multitude of forms. This new narrative is created beyond the boundaries (while in dialectical recognition) of the previous, external and internalized narrative of oppression. Identifying itself within this

new narrative of subjective and objective history, the community is empowered, while publicly expressing its presence in history, to make new history and a new destiny for itself, in an organized program of social and political action, thus adding new chapters to its historical narrative. While in the aesthetic project of composing its narrative and while at the same time in the political project of acting from its new story, the community is re-composing itself, both symbolically and actually in freedom and with justice."

Jubilee had been invited to northern California to do art projects in the very polarized community of Mendocino County. The major tensions in the community existed between the people who relied on the logging industry for their daily bread and the environmentalists who were putting their bodies on the line to save the remaining old growth forests.

Into this fray came a group of thirty or so activist artists and cultural workers from all over the U.S. and the Jubilee team. Our goal was to learn how to use art to create dialog between communities in conflict and to make the narrative of invisible groups visible. We had a laboratory to learn about the process. Every day we participated in a series of exercises that are standard fare for Jubilee cultural workers. **Action/Research**, a term to describe a way of gathering information and making art from it, was the most the important lesson we gained from our time together.

We broke into small groups and were asked to share a social issue that concerned each of us at that moment. We each discussed our individual issue for several minutes, and shared a story with the group that illustrated our concern. We created a list of issues and discussed how our issues were interrelated.

After that we were invited to make a skill inventory. The skills that we listed were very broad from: "writes poetry" to "makes good soup" to "talks well on the phone." With this list and the list of social concerns, we began to brainstorm a form, an intention, and a context. In other words, we developed an art piece that connected many of the our social concerns and that could be made in the space of 24 hours using the skills that we have brought to the table. We thought carefully about who our audience was, what the limitations of our skills, materials, and exhibiting space were, and what we hoped to accomplish.

While the product of our efforts was not memorable, the process was. Within two days we had developed new ways to communicate and create consensus with a group of strangers. We were ready to go out into the world and practice with these new skills.

Our group was assigned to the local Senior Center where our intention was to collect stories about the elders' perceptions of both the tensions and the benefits of living in the area. We found different ways to start conversations and once a little trust was established we asked people if they wanted to photograph each other. The portraits and the stories became the substance of an exhibit at the local mall. Since the stories were gathered in the cafeteria we decided to exhibit the portraits and the stories as place settings.

This taste of Action/Research was a beginning. To be affective cultural animators requires all participants to make a commitment of time and resources. Trust must be built slowly. When one is not a member of the group, a bridge person must be found. An artist/facilitator who dips into a group

for a short stay and exploits the group's talents for the artist's own benefit can create bad feelings all around.

The inspiration I brought home from my work with Jubilee was obvious. I was asked by my department chair to renovate and re-energize a course on "Artist Survival Skills" that had previously focused on resume and portfolio development, and networking skills. My new course looked at social concerns that affected artists' lives and was a required course for all art majors. Students looked at how artists are educated, how the mainstream art world functions, how artists who work in community facilitate their work, how sexism, censorship, homophobia and racism affect artists, and how to survive in a society that is trained to be art-unfriendly. We had guest artists and art professionals come and give relevant lectures every other week. I put together a collection of readings to supplement the issues raised by the speakers and my lectures. Aside from an open book essay exam at the end of the course, the only other assignment was for students to work collaboratively on a community art project of their own design.

This course became controversial for quite an interesting reason. One colleague despaired that I was not preparing students properly for the outside world. He said, "These are working class students who need to find jobs in the art world and in the Industry (Hollywood). Your questions will make it difficult for them to fit in and accept the positions that are available."

Perhaps this colleague did not understand the goal of social change. Realizing that most art students stop making art and looking for work in art related fields after receiving endless rejections from employers, galleries and granting agencies, my greatest desire was that these students would develop the confidence, resources, and smarts to create new opportunities, paths, and alternative institutions. Or, if they chose to work within the mainstream, that they could offer up their critical thinking skills to subvert the discourse and open up the minds of their colleagues.

Art for Imagining the Future and Envisioning Utopias

In 1991 I was invited to lecture on my work and activist art at the Institute for Social Ecology (ISE)(2). At the time ISE was located on the Goddard College campus, in the lush, green mountains of central Vermont (ISE has since bought its own property in the same town and is now accredited through Burlington College). During the month long residency I facilitated several art projects with the students, including a collaborative bookwork filled with photo collages, drawings, and text of visions for the future. I call that first summer at ISE my "introduction to utopian thinking." There I met some of the most idealistic and visionary community activists that I had ever met. The students came from all over the world, some working in communities where their work in literacy campaigns or planning housing projects was life threatening (because of the inhumane governments in power). Many of these students had never thought of themselves as artists, but they had the imaginations to fuel movements and to create bridges into all kinds of communities.

From that first summer and through eleven more, my husband Bob Spivey (who had received his Master's in Social Ecology with a focus on activist art) and I co-facilitated a course called "Activist Art in Community." The course changed shape, size and facilitators but it remained an essential part of the ISE summer diet and was offered at other colleges as a weeklong workshop.

We started the ISE course with an introduction to various strategies for making activist art and community cultural work. I shared a slide show about activist art that had many threads: pre-McCarthy era socially engaged art from the early part of the 20th century, the first stirrings of protest art during the Vietnam War era, early feminist art and contemporary work that embraces women's issues, ecological art that ranges from projects that "reclaim" damaged pieces of the environment to work that addresses the infiltration of genetically modified foods in our diet, art about racism and cultural identity, art created as part of the anti-nuclear movement, art about the AIDs crisis, homelessness, poverty, unemployment and gentrification, community-based art projects, and anti-globalization art.

After viewing the slides we began a discussion that continued in different forms throughout our time together. We looked at satire as it manifests in the form of "culture jamming," also known as "subvertising," and debated the effects that it has on viewers. We looked at the advantages of showing work in all kinds of public spaces: college galleries, museums, shopping malls, city walls, subway cars, billboards, magazine racks, storefronts, the Internet, beauty salons, laundromats – basically anywhere that people gather.

We talked about the many purposes of socially engaged art; including: to provoke thought, to wake up those who are in denial, to create dialog between groups in conflict, to make invisible groups more visible, to empower, to heal, to educate, to reveal hidden histories, to celebrate a community's strengths, to document, to speak when everyone is scared, to enlighten, to transform, and to speak to truth. We debated the necessity for strong aesthetics; in other words, does it need to be beautiful or visually seductive in order to attract the viewer?

Next the students were introduced to a version of an **Action/Research** process that we learned from members of the Jubilee Arts group. I suggested that the students work with gut issues, things that they had directly experienced. During the brainstorming process we encouraged students to focus on how their issues were interconnected (using some of the theories of social ecology), what their goals were for their piece, who they were trying to reach and in what context they wished to reach this particular audience.

We also encouraged students to continue a version of Action/Research in their home communities with a team of collaborators. Every community can benefit from this process – whether it is celebrating the creativity of invisible residents, working with the alienation between teens and adults, healing splits between newcomers, transplants, and old-timers, or sharing antidotes to consumer culture.

After the students shared their A/R work and gave each other helpful feedback, they spent the rest of their time at ISE developing new projects (both individual and collaborative ones). In our many conversations, we tried to distinguish the difference between many forms of activist art and made no judgments about which form is more important or valuable. Socially engaged art that is produced by individuals working alone may have a powerful impact on audiences. Cultural work that is a byproduct of a movement can make a significant impression, especially when the media lens is focused on it. Projects that emerge out of a community/cultural animation process may also have an enormous effect on the public, but perhaps the most crucial aspect of this particular work is what it does for the community itself. The key point here is that one form might be more appropriate for a

particular intention and context, and each artist needs to evaluate those choices based on her or his abilities.

The two-week schedule of our last version of Art, Media, Activism and Social Change included many different components: social ecology theory, media theory, hands on technical workshops, a practicum on media literacy, performative exercises that were influenced by Playback Theater techniques (3) and Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (4), and lecture/demonstrations by visiting artists like the Beehive Collective (whose anti-globalization projects take many forms)(5). Graciela Monteagudo (member of Bread and Puppet Theater and creator of her own street theater projects concerning the Mothers of the Disappeared from Argentina) (6) and Seth Tobocman (founder of World War III comics – a publication whose artists have focused on many social issues including homelessness and the squatter movement of the Lower East Side).

Unfortunately the failing economy during the Bush-Cheney era has had a deep effect on the future of ISE. With many fewer students and the loss of faculty who had to find more a more generous source of income (including myself), our program has come to a temporary halt. Still it is important to mention a few success stories. One student, who was part of our weeklong course at Hampshire College, co-founded the Cycle Circus, also known as Puppets on Bikes. This diverse group of cyclist performers and cultural activists based in Austin, Texas focuses on border issues and looks at how the Free Trade Agreement affects the people who live there. Using puppet shows, comic books, and "cantahistorias" (they sing or chant a story with pictorial banners), their collaborative work looks at the life of sweatshop workers along the Texas-Mexican border (7). Another recent ISE student was inspired by our workshop to continue a series of video and audio projects that look at how patriotism is manifesting in the public sphere in Urbana-Champaign, Illinois. Still others have gone on to host independent radio programs, run cultural programs at bookstores, and do all manner of street art in collaboration with grass roots movements.

Widening Circles

After twenty plus years of lecturing on activist art I am sometimes discouraged when audience members come up to me and say, "I had no idea that there was art like this. It is so inspiring." This feedback suggests to me that what little art education most people receive is not giving them a broad range of models. At a time when the most innovative frontiers of education are exploring the interdisciplinary, it would make sense that more art educators would be attracted to socially engaged art. Of course, as I mentioned previously, there are many institutions that are quite frightened by the idea of critical thinking. These art departments will continue to happily graduate students who stop making art within a few years of graduation because they can't find a way to survive in the art world as it is currently constructed. Sadly many of these graduates think that it is their fault. What a benefit it would be to society as a whole to have more artists who feel a sense of social responsibility and who have the passion to continue making their work despite the obstacles.

In 1998 I was invited to join the faculty of the new and innovative program, the MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts at Goddard College (8). This program manifests a part of my dream for a socially engaged art education. Students in this low residency, long distance program are asked to develop or strengthen their artistic voice and to look at their work in terms of personal story, social engagement, healing and spiritual growth. Like other Goddard programs that are based on John Dewey's philosophy of learner-based education, students must develop their own study plan with an

advisor each semester. Critical thinking is an explicit part of the program goals. As part of the five semesters, students must spend at least one semester working on a community-based art practicum.

This program has attracted some of the most remarkable students and faculty I have ever encountered. One graduate is doing audience participatory installations and workshops in the local high schools about body image and eating disorders. Another former student is doing performance art and videos about newly revealed stories about the U.S. involvement in Korea. The graduates from this program are teaching, exhibiting, organizing conferences, raising money and facilitating projects all over the world.

While my work at Goddard was rewarding in many ways, my work as an advisor did not pay the bills. I spent years applying for other jobs, becoming known as a professional finalist among my peers. The academic job market (not to mention the life of an artist) is a perilous one, and it has required a combination of dogged perseverance and the support of a meditation practice to maneuver the roller coaster. The latter, what is often referred to as mindfulness practice, has served me well as a teacher as well as an artist.

In 1989 I had my first opportunity to study with Thich Nhat Hanh (9), the Vietnamese Zen teacher, poet, and peace activist. After participating in a retreat that he led for activist artists, I began a slow process of integrating this socially engaged spiritual practice and different traditions of yoga, into my work and everyday life. Two subsequent health crises, both of which I have recovered from completely, reinforced the need for these spiritual disciplines to guide my activist art making. The breathing in and breathing out of despair, art as the embodiment and connection with a vision, and the communion offered by meditating with others, are now essential pieces of my path.

As a teacher I discuss mindful breathing and deep listening as an important part of the creative process. When we engage in exercises that allow the students to be grounded in their bodies, I know that the work that emerges will be stronger. Art that creates dialog and reconciliation between polarized groups, develops awareness and compassion about the suffering of others, explores a positive identity in relation to a society that diminishes and oppresses "the other," and celebrates aspects of life that are not promoted by consumer culture, can be deeply refreshed by a socially engaged spiritual practice of any kind.

Perhaps more than anything else, mindfulness has allowed me to embrace the idea that a cultural revolution needs many kinds of practitioners: those who are solitary, who use art to heal and process that angst of living in the world today; those who work collaboratively, facilitating an emancipatory community-based art; those whose culture jamming, street art, and performances critique the current hegemony and galvanize grass roots movements; and finally those whose work creates a utopic and celebratory vision of what we are working towards.

In the fall of 2003 I joined the faculty of the Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Program at the University of Washington, Tacoma.(10) For this program I have been developing new studio arts curriculum to be part of an Arts, Media, and Culture concentration. With the enthusiastic support of several progressive educators who are my new colleagues I am creating courses that will hopefully be a model of how to teach the arts for personal and social transformation. So far my new courses include: "Eco-Art – Making Art in Response to the Environmental Crisis," "Body Image and Art," and "Cultural Identity, Fear of Difference, and Art." Syllabi are being developed for "Media Literacy

and Culture Jamming,” “Sense of Place and Community-Based Art” “Art that Responds to War,” “Labor, Globalization and Art.”(11) In an environment that has encouraged me to teach whatever I want, more ideas for courses keep emerging everyday.

My students are non-traditional and range in age from 20 to 65. Many have or have had families and jobs, and are retraining after being laid off. Most are working class, and some are the first in their families to attend college. Tacoma is a small city surrounded by military bases, and many of the students are veterans or connected with the military in some way. I am definitely not preaching to the choir.

Right now most of our students have little or no background in art (even though they are all in their last two years of college) and are taking art classes as an elective. My tasks with each new group of students are multi-faceted. The work is similar to facilitating two community-based art projects every 10 weeks. I help the students develop critical thinking skills about the social issue being addressed and offer them the opportunity to tell their stories, both individually and collaboratively, with a wide variety of art strategies. I introduce them to the visual grammar I learned as a student of Western aesthetics while pushing them to think conceptually and contextually. We list stereotypes that they have about artists and art making, explore the various roles that art can play in society, and look at examples of contemporary art that speak to the social issue we are examining. I watch as their minds stretch and bend to take it all in, and hope that, above all, taking my courses will help these students become more imaginative, open-minded, critically-thinking and responsible citizens. One student at a time, one story at a time, it might be possible to spark a progressive shift in the culture.

Seeing Beyond This Moment

Doing the “slow” work of teaching when looking at the scale of problems our world is currently facing can be overwhelming, but I feel grateful for the privilege to do this work and it helps if I stay focused on a vision. I imagine a world where daily problems are explored and collective consciousness raising is shared through art making. Where people don’t look to one spiritual or political leader to make things right, but seek solutions creatively, using their intellects, hearts and spirits, examining how their efforts and decisions can effect the 7th generation. (12)

At this particularly challenging moment in our nation’s history, when civil rights are being curtailed and public dissent regarding the dominant political will is either being ignored or suppressed, the arts can play a key role in generating more democratic discussion of social policy. The arts can also give us a sense of hope and possibility in an era when many are losing their will to believe in a just and thriving future for the people of the world. I try to remain optimistic that more of us will use the arts to provoke dialog, empower the invisible and alienated, raise questions about things we take for granted, educate the uninformed, to heal rifts in polarized communities and within individuals who have been wounded by society's ills, and provide a vision for a future where people can live in greater harmony with each other and the natural world. Perhaps the work I have been doing will inspire others and keep the passion for social change burning.

- (1) www.thepublic.com
- (2) www.social-ecology.org
- (3) www.playbacknet.org/iptn/index.htm
- (4) www.unomaha.edu/~pto/
- (5) www.beehivecollective.org
- (6) members.aol.com/autonomista1/about.htm

(7) www.cyclecircus.org

(8) www.goddard.edu

(9) www.parallax.org/

(10) www.tacoma.washington.edu/ias/

(11) www.artsforchange.org

(12) The **seventh generation standard** is a concept that originates from indigenous North Americans who believed that the decisions of today should take into account the well being of the next seven generations.