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## TEAR DOWN THESE WALLS: NEW GENRE PUBLIC ART AND ART EDUCATION

GAYLE LEIGH GREEN

Public genre art education follows the lead established by the professional art world to engage the public with artforms that depart from traditional media usage and intentions to encourage collaboration, the demystification of art processes, and societal reconstruction. Termed new genre public art, Suzanne Lacy (1995) described in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* a new sensibility exhibited in the past three decades by artists who deal with the most profound issues of our time "in manners that resemble political and social activity but is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility" (p. 19).

Addressing artistic reconceptualization of both form and content, the artists included in this movement "cross borders, invent new forms of representation, and at the same time interrogate the quality of social life by addressing the language of sexuality, social exclusion, identity, and power while avoiding a doctrinaire politics or narrow critique of the sites in which art is produced" (Giroux, 1996, p. x). Privileging public response rather than private authorship, public genre artists such as Guillermo Gomez-Pena redresses historical inequity through "pseudo-ethnographic dioramas" while muralist Judith Baca engages the public in large-scale projects that "portray the struggles and contributions of indigenous peoples, immigrant minorities, and women from prehistory to present" (Lacy, p. 202.) Ranging from ritual performance to installation and mixed media forms, the content of public genre art functions as social criticism with reconstruction as its primary objective.

The inclusion of public genre art concepts and methodology in art education encourages students to envision new art forms, engage the community in projects that are socially reconstructive, and to reconceptualize artmaking as intellectual, scholarly endeavor. Such rethinking of art education curricula requires the presentation and analysis of work by such artists, study and evaluation of societal issues, consideration of audience, installation or performance of work, and final evaluation. The process is summarized in the following chart.

## PUBLIC GENRE ART EDUCATION METHODOLOGY

**Media Usage:** Research public genre artists by examining their use of media, concepts, and philosophy. Suggest possible forms of representation to include: indoor exhibits, outdoor exhibits, site specific interactive, performance, didactic, exhibit specific, portable public access, intercultural exchanges, community liaisons, and indoor public installation.

**Conceptual:** Research social issues such as gender, race, and class by reading newspapers and periodicals, observing how such issues are presented in the media, and consulting other fields of related study such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology. Choose an issue that is relevant or significant to your life and/or society. Explore the visual solutions of public genre artists to represent the selected issue. Read what art critics, art historians, artists, aestheticians, and art educators have written about the topic.

**Artistic Formulation/Public Interaction:** Brainstorm artforms that can be used to express the selected issue. Consider both traditional and nontraditional media forms, especially concentrating on experimental forms. Determine cost, site, and materials. Consider the composition of the audience, potential for collaboration, and the impact and significance to the community.

**Revision:** Revise concept, form, and media usage. Reconsider audience, space, and materials.

**Install or Perform Work:** Install or perform work for public interaction.

**Evaluation:** Evaluate the conceptual nature of work, issue selected, relationship to professional public genre work, media usage, and effect on audience. If a formal evaluation tool was used with the audience, what were the results? Which artists, art critics, art historians, art educators, and aestheticians did you research and how did you apply the information within the artistic process?

To provide examples of student work that exemplifies public genre art education, I present five student projects that illustrate outdoor exhibits, performance, portable public access, intercultural exchange, and community liaison. The categorization of possible art forms are based in part on those presented by Lucy Lippard in the article—"Looking Around: Where We Are, Where We Could Be."

**Outdoor Exhibits:** The ramifications of being both a mother and a lesbian prompted the creation of an outdoor exhibit by a Western Washington student. Concerned with the escalating statistics wherein the court system has not only limited the contact of lesbian mothers with their children but has also, in some cases, completely denied custody, the student researched organizations and resources regarding the legal rights of lesbian mothers. In order to educate the community, she placed five dolls throughout the university campus. Upon each doll's stomach, the artist placed texts that noted the proceedings of various court cases—for example, in the spring of 1995, a Wyoming mother's visitation rights were severely restricted to six weekends a year with no overnight visits due to her sexual orientation. In conjunction with the dolls, the student also exhibited a poster with additional statistics and the text, "Have you seen me? What do we fear?"

Curiously, the poster, the journal that the student had left for comments, and all of the dolls disappeared by 2:00 p.m. of the same day in which they were exhibited. Such projects not only educate the public about vital cultural issues, they also inform a community of their fears and biases.

**Performance:** In "Rain" art education student Lynda Lucas presented a performance piece that focused on societal perception of obesity. Composing a monologue that chronicled a lifelong struggle with weight problems, Lucas related the taunting that she received as a



Figure 1



Figure 2

child, the continued public stares, and misconceptions about public views of overweight people. Using the word "rain" as a metaphor, Lucas passed out rainsticks that her audience was instructed to manipulate whenever they heard the work rain. A work that reflected both personal and political implications of obesity, the performance was both edifying and poignant.

**Portable Public Access:** Questioning how Asian women are stereotyped by American culture, art education student Carla Field circulated a poster asking: "Who is this girl?" The multiple choice answers included: "A. The foreign exchange student that studies 20 hours a day. B. The girl who has more boyfriends than classes. C. No one you really know." The poster concluded with the following statement: "It is easier to ask this girl who she really is instead of shoving her in a mold. Break the stereotypes. Our nation is depending on it." Posting the flyer throughout campus and local venues as a preview for a Roger Shimomura retrospective to be held in Western Gallery, Field provided a provocative introduction to an exhibit that also addressed how stereotypes are promulgated by society.

**Intercultural Exchange:** The organization of a mail art exchange that focused on the theme of body representation as influenced by race, culture, and sexual identity, demonstrates one possible form of national and international liaisons. Organized by art education Patricia Cutts for Western Washington Viking Union Gallery, Body Language featured works from such diverse communities as Uruguay, England, and Mexico including media forms that ranged from metal sculpture to intricately drawn postcards. By soliciting artwork from world-wide sources through student generated websites, Cutts created an installation that provided international perspectives, and cross-cultural insight.

**Community Liaison:** Art education student Lynda Lucas formed a liaison between a group of Bellingham, W.A. retirees and elementary students that attend Alderwood Elementary School. Meeting for weekly art sessions, the senior citizens served as mentors for the children facilitating lessons in contemporary studio concepts and practice. Developing relationships that were both compelling and inspiring, such associations demonstrate the utility of community-based endeavors.

## TEAR DOWN THESE WALLS

"Society is formal. Community is soulful" (Harper, 1994, p. 1.). The words of art critic Peter Schjeldahl resonate the profound experience that public genre art education can generate. The projects presented in this paper merely hint at the potential for pedagogy that engages the community with relevant, socially-conscious content.

Facilitating artmaking that is relevant to both the personal lives of students and the society in which they reside, public genre artmaking melds aesthetic practice into life experiences. Although this approach fosters critical thinking by requiring students to analyze, revise, and synthesize through studio practice based on research, public genre art education encourages instruction that transcends the acquisition of information by teaching students to utilize artmaking for the purposes of restructuring society. Such endeavor heeds Graham Chalmer's suggestion that while acknowledgment of diversity is laudatory, it is time to act by questioning and challenging the dominant culture's art world canons and structures through social action (Chalmer, 1996, p. 45).

Ultimately, community-based methodology propels students beyond the confines of classroom walls into the world-at-large. Considering Becker's observation that "today's schools were, for the most part, conceptualized decades ago" and that they are "on the verge of becoming obsolete," it seems timely that we rethink art education objectives and pedagogy to include curricula that exposes oppression, includes all cultural groups, and that teaches our students to become agents of social change, reconstruction, and humanization (p. 105).



*Retirement and Elementary School  
Liaison*

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## BOOK REVIEW

SUSAN L. SMITH (1995);  
 THE POWER OF WOMEN:  
 A TOPOS IN MEDIEVAL ART AND LITERATURE,

Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 295 pages, 49 black and white reproductions. Typeset in Linotron Galliard, retaining many features of the 16th century typeface. Printed on acid-free paper.

ISBN: 0-8122-3279-8 (hardcover) approx. \$65.00

## KAREN KEIFER-BOYD

While browsing the library shelves I came upon a 1995 book, *The Power of Women* by Susan L. Smith. I was surprised to find inside the book many images of a woman riding a old man with the title under each image, "The Mounted Aristotle." Even more unusual was that these carved stone reliefs, embroideries, and manuscript illuminations were included in the sacred venues of Medieval churches. Later at a social gathering, I asked a group of colleagues if they had ever seen or heard about the mounted Aristotle. A historian who had taken a series of graduate courses in the 1980s taught by a leading scholar of Medieval times had never seen these images or heard about the topic in the three courses he had taken. An art historian, who specialized in Renaissance art, while not familiar with the images thought that they might refer to the woman as representing the spirit while Aristotle represented merely secular knowledge. The university art educators in the group had never seen the images. A brief perusal of the book only made me more puzzled. Once I began to read the 202 page book (with an additional 74 pages listing the abbreviations used, notes to each chapter, works cited, and an index) I could not put it down until I had read the whole thing and explored Smith's interpretation of "The Mounted Aristotle."