

For the past decade I have been writing and speaking about the education of artists. I have theorized, analyzed, and deconstructed how we educate our students and why we must finally break, in both theory and practice, with the nineteenth-century Romantic notion of the artist that has dominated our educational institutions for almost two centuries. In January 1996 teams from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Corcoran School of Art, and the San Francisco Art Institute met at the Headlands Center for the Arts in northern California to discuss what new types of curricular initiatives could be devised to shake up traditional pedagogical models and address the present place of artists in society and the role of artists as citizens. The preliminary conversations and those at the Headlands were generously funded by the List Foundation.

Our teams comprised students, faculty, and administrators; the sessions were chaired by these constituencies interchangeably. We spent three days together in meetings, dinners, and walks through the landscape, happily isolated in the beautiful Headlands setting. Certain faculty members and students did not agree with the rest about what art students needed or wanted at this

time, and there were a few seriously heated arguments about what it means to question the original orientations and missions of our institutions. In particular an argument between me and one faculty member centered on my sense that there should be

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The Art of Crossing the Street

multiple ways of understanding oneself as an artist, not just one that restricted artists' work to a gallery/museum paradigm. But his interpretation of my statement was that I was insisting that everyone should make "political art." I encounter this fundamental misunderstanding whenever I speak to more traditional art school faculty members who assume the phrase "multiple ways of being an artist" really is a critique of past work that artists have made and the way that they have lived their lives. I always encounter the two-pronged assumption that to challenge how artists are taught actually is to bring a political "agenda" to the process, whereas insisting that art has and should have little to do with society is a nonideological stance. I inevitably hold my ground and insist that it is unrealistic and inauthentic to presume that there is only one way to be an artist, that artists, at this time, are working in many different ways, with many measures of success and accomplishment. I also assert that ideology is built into all pedagogical models, even in those where it is not explicitly articulated. Our students need to understand the range of choices that artists historically have made and how they might position themselves to be most effective.

The discussions among school representatives at the Headlands meeting finally resulted in an agreement: for the fall of 1997. We would all offer some pilot class that, if successful, might become a requirement in the future. This class would directly address the roles of the artist as citizen and participant in society. Each institution was free to formulate its own ideas about how to conceptualize such an initiative in order for it to function within its own school. We, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, called our class *The Art of Crossing the Street*. In the original description of this class we asked the question: "How can artists cross the street without leaving their art behind?"

We envisioned a pilot program, still subsidized in part by the List Foundation, that would use three faculty members and a series of visiting artists. We imagined a two-semester sequence, the first semester the more theoretical one, using the three-hour seminar format, and the second semester a six-hour studio format, both team-taught. The students who had participated in the Headlands conference, most of whom were already student leaders, were invited to serve as teaching assistants and were part of the discussions designed to choose the reading material, the sequence of topics for discussion, and the visiting artists.

We selected three faculty members whom we thought would complement each other: Lisa Brock, historian of the African American and Caribbean diasporas; Matthew Goulish, artist, writer, and member of the performance company Goat Island (fig. 1); Michael Ryan, artist, educator, and arts administrator, who has worked with the Student Union Gallery teaching students how to curate and produce exhibitions. In addition, we asked George Roeder, a U.S. historian, particularly of the visual environment (also part of the Headlands team), to coordinate the many aspects of the class and to record the results.

In the summer of 1997 we sent all incoming freshmen a letter describing The Art of Crossing the Street and gave them the option of choosing it instead of a required freshmen English class. The enrollment in the first class was almost fifty students, half of them freshmen, although there were many upper-level students who wanted to take the class as an elective and had been waiting "for years" to study the issues of artist as citizen. The idea was to keep the class together as a unit when there was a visiting artist/scholar/writer/intellectual and then to split the class into smaller groups when there was a discussion about the readings. This proved to be the biggest structural problem: because there were so many presenters and so much to discuss with the group as a whole, we did not break the large group into smaller units often enough. Unfortunately, having too many large sessions left only the most gregarious students confident enough to speak.

The teaching team (students and faculty) chose the books that would be required reading and envisioned the division of the units.¹ Basic units included the possibilities and challenges of community work; the reality of artists' lives; the work of engaged artists, with a focus on Fred Wilson, Bill T. Jones, and Merle Laderman Ukeles; South Africa—postcolonialism, the National Artists Coalition, artists in struggle. There were many visiting artists and arts activists who spoke to the group or to the larger school community about their work and about how they came to be who they are and do the work they do. These guests included poet Roberto Bedoya, Director, the National Association of Artists' Organizations; Claudia Bernardi, painter and forensics expert; Rick Lowe, Director, Project Row Houses (fig. 2); Nayland Blake, photographer; and Bill T. Jones, dancer and choreographer.

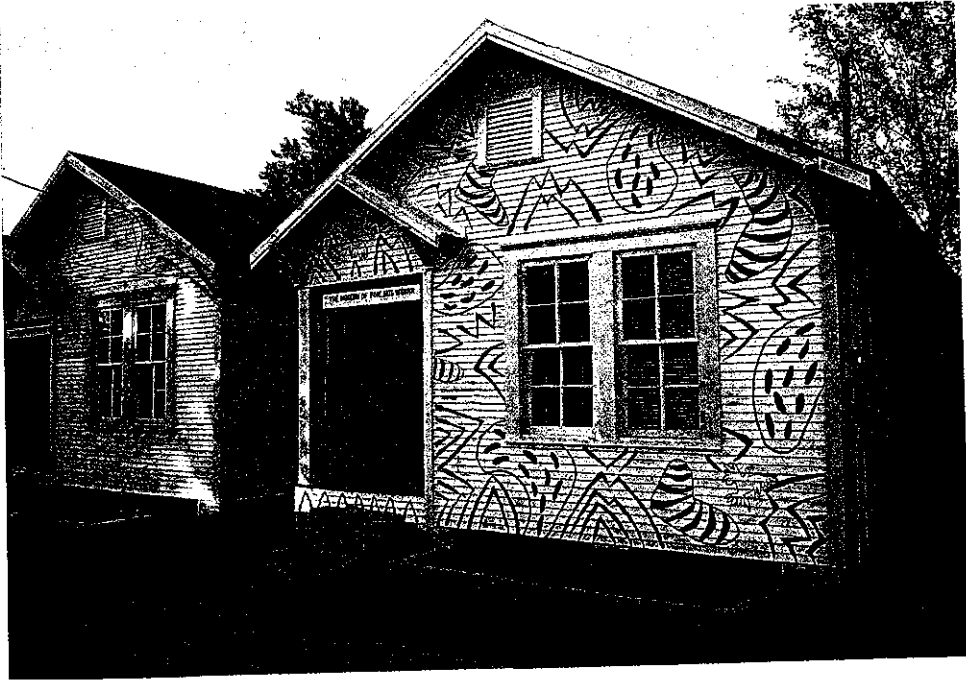
The students were asked to write four papers analyzing various lectures, exhibitions, or other events they attended with the class. They also were asked to interview someone whose work and life they admired. Some students did projects and used these as the subject of their papers. Certain of these projects directly affected the school community, while other students went into the

1. Texts for the class included Carol Becker, *The Subversive Imagination: Artists, Society, and Social Responsibility* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and *Zones of Contention: Essays on Art, Institutions, Gender, and Anxiety* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996); David Bayles and Ted Orland, *Art and Fear: Observations on the Perils (and Rewards) of Art-making* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1994); J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (New York: Penguin, 1982); Robin Kelley, "Kickin' Reality, Kickin' Ballistics: 'Gangsta Rap' and Postindustrial Los Angeles," in *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994); George Roeder, "Making Things Visible: Learning from the Censors," in *Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age*, ed. Laura Hein and Mark Selden (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1997), 73–99; Henry David Thoreau, *Civil Disobedience and Other Essays* (New York: Dover, 1993); Mike Wallace, "The Battle of Enola Gay," in *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Ray Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?" in *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

city and worked as volunteers in churches, Head Start programs, community centers—sharing their skills in computing, writing, art making.

Perhaps the most moving papers were those written about a visit students made to meet Zolo Agona Azania, a prisoner on death row in Michigan City, Indiana. Zolo allegedly killed a police officer, although he denies this accusation. He has spent most of his adult life in prison, where he has become a

painter, initially instructed by a fellow inmate. As a result of their encounter with Zolo, the students were moved to observe and then write eloquently about their own situations—in particular, how much freedom and privilege they actually have, how many possibilities and opportunities their own lives provide. Others expressed an understanding of how loved and cared for they have been and still are. They were struck by Zolo's good-naturedness in the face of his impending death. He never expressed anxiety about his situation to them; rather, he seemed inordinately joyful. Conrad Freiburg, a student in the class, wrote: "He was so optimistic and sure of his innocence, and I was sure of his loneliness."

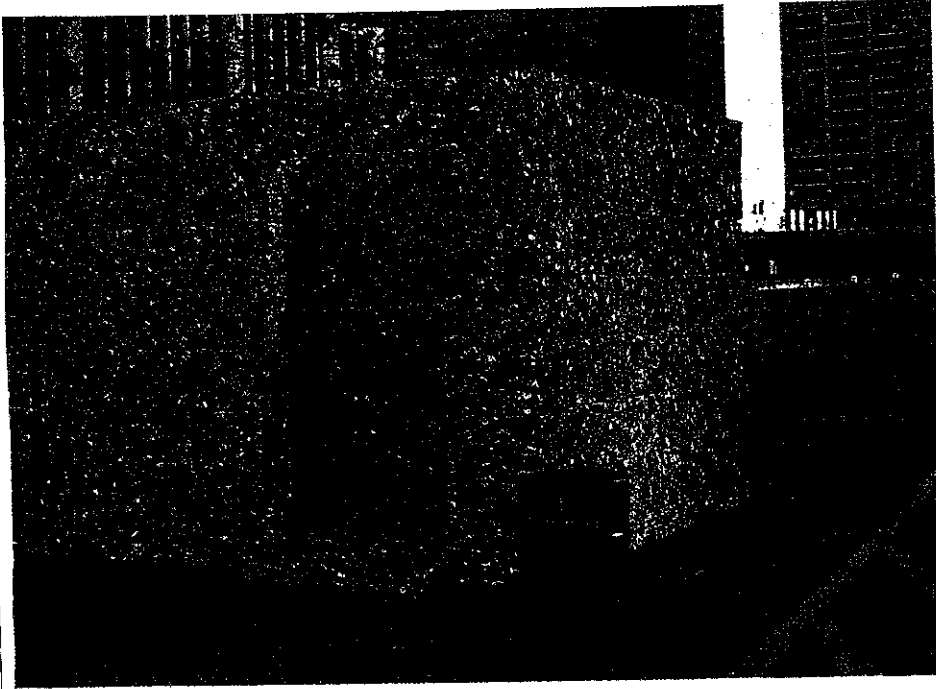


2. Floyd Newson.
Tribal Marking, 1994.
One of the Project
Row Houses in
Houston, Texas
(director, Rick
Lowe).

Several of the students, including Conrad, felt the desolateness of his situation had opened their hearts and made them want to go out into the world with their enormous range of options and opportunities to make some good things happen for people other than themselves.

During the first semester I lectured on the role of artists in South Africa, focusing on how the term political was defined in relationship to art making during the apartheid years. I explained the sophistication and breadth of the National Artists Coalition, an organization formed by thousands of South African artists, many of whom were in the ANC, to help develop a policy for arts and culture so that when the ANC came to power, the position of artists would be secured, free, and supported by the new government. I pointed out that even those who have worked closely with the ANC were not certain that any government ultimately could be trusted to give art its rightful place without the intervention of artists' voices. History has proven them to be correct, and these same artists are now grappling with the complexity of postapartheid conditions. As part of a class entitled *Art and Politics in the New Southern Africa*, Lisa Brock, Valerie Cassel, Marilyn Sward, and I took sixteen students to South Africa and Zimbabwe in January 1998 on a study trip. Some students who had been in *The Art of Crossing the Street* class participated. And some from the South Africa class were inspired to take the second half of *The Art of Crossing the Street*.

The spring semester of the course has been structured around a six-hour studio format. Three faculty members have been assigned once again, and this time they are all artists who have worked in collective, collaborative, community-based contexts. One is a visiting professor from South Africa, sculptor Andries Botha; another is video artist Maria Benfield, who has done intensive neighborhood street video making with gang members and inner-



3. Dan Peterman.
Model Efficiency, 1989.
6,400 pounds of densified recycled aluminum cans. Installation view, City Front, Chicago.
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery.

2. Additional syllabi can be found on the Art Journal website.

3. Henry Sayre's *A World of Art: Works in Progress* is a ten-part video series produced and created by Sayre. Funded by the Annenberg/CPB Foundation, it is inexpensive and a terrific addition to any art school or university library. It can be ordered by phoning 1-800-LEARNER. The artists included in the series are Judy Baca, Beverly Buchanan, Goat Island, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Hung Liu, Lorna Simpson, Milton Resnick, Merle Laderman Ukeles, Bill Viola, and June Wayne.

city youth; the third artist/faculty member is Michael Ryan, who has worked in the student affairs department at the School and has helped students to coordinate the student galleries and exhibition spaces. There have also been many guest lecturers and a new selection of readings,² as well as serious debate and discussion about collective practice.

In the class we have presented artists and thinkers who have found ways to treat the entire society as a suitable site for the presentation of their work. Dan Peterman, for example, one of our visiting artists, had moved his studio into a recycling center in order to be close to the materials he uses for his sculptural installations and to reflect his concern for ecological issues as manifested in his art making (fig. 3).

To further integrate himself into the community, he has also set up a bicycle repair shop adjacent to his work space. Neighborhood youth now come together there to fix their bicycles and, once they learn the skills and help others, they can earn credit toward acquiring a bicycle or bicycle accessories. This communal bike shop is only one way Peterman hopes to get to know his community and ultimately to achieve his goal of making the work he wants, as he wants, from the materials he wants, and to do so within the society, engaging people at all stages of the work's development. Not all artists can function in such public ways. Not all need to. The challenge for students is to ask themselves what their goals are and how to achieve them.

After watching videotapes from Henry Sayre's series of artists' tapes, entitled *A World of Art: Works in Progress*, it became important for students to note, for example, that Guillermo Gómez-Peña (an artist included in Sayre's series), who has used pirate radio as a format for his cultural interventions, is now doing "legitimate" radio spots on National Public Radio. He uses some of the same techniques he developed for alternative systems, while reaching a new, wider audience.³

The first initiative to be presented by the second-semester students in *The Art of Crossing the Street* to their own community has been an attempt to organize a protest against increased Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) service

reductions throughout the city. There has been a gesture on the part of the CTA to extend a reduced-rate pass to students attending school in the downtown area; eligibility for this pass is based on complex requirements. But many students do not want any privileges extended to them that are not also extended to more underserved communities. There has been intense discussion about how artists and creative people in general—those capable of bringing new ideas into the society—have the moral obligation to use these talents to help others. It is an argument some students outside the organizing group have trouble accepting. It is fascinating to watch students take up issues that they see as morally correct and then confront peers who refuse to join their struggles. I await the outcome of these initiatives. Other possible projects that came out of the second-semester studio portion of the class include a courthouse mural about racial diversity; a gesture/action in which the entire faculty and staff of the school and museum, as well as the students, would exit the Art Institute buildings at the same time to take part in a collective performative moment called Three Degrees of Separation (the shape of which is yet to be determined); an "Artswap" in which artists would come together at the Cultural Center to trade their wares with those of dentists, carpenters, hairdressers, or whoever wants to trade services or objects for art. The idea is to take the purchasing of art out of a traditional money exchange market and into a barter economy, thus making art more available to anyone who desires it.

The Art of Crossing the Street has been a pilot project that we are constantly scrutinizing and evaluating. We are committed to offering the class again next year and, as before, there will be teaching teams. It has already become part of both our curriculum and of the school's culture. And although we envisioned the course for freshmen, half the students taking the class were juniors and seniors. This composition has been very important to the success of the class, as has been the racial diversity of the faculty, which has encouraged a similar mix in the student population.

To experience the methodologies of many artists who are not afraid of asking difficult questions, and who have been able to answer them successfully for themselves, helps students imagine their own futures courageously without being immobilized by the contradictions in U.S. society. They need to learn that consciousness can lead to action, that there are artists who experiment in form and content and take their inspiration from their interaction with the world. They will, of course, also have ample opportunity to learn about more traditional forms of art making in their other studio and art history classes.

The epigram chosen for The Art of Crossing the Street was also its inspiration. It comes from *The I Ching; or, The Book of Changes* and presents the goals for this project:

By contemplating the forms existing in the heavens, we come to understand time and its changing demands.

Through contemplation of the forms existing in human society it becomes possible to shape the world.⁴

4. Our use of this quotation from *The I Ching; or, The Book of Changes*, originally translated and edited by Wilhelm Baynes and published in the Bollingen Series 19 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), was actually taken from John Cage's essay "Lecture on Something," in *Silence* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).

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