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The Transformative Quality of Art

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Abstract

In his book, *Step Outside: Community-Based Art Education* (1994), Peter London contends that effective and successful teaching begins by acknowledging and incorporating the natural curiosity students bring to their artwork. In the preface of his book he states that "the principles for making the curriculum more responsive to the world of the child (or adolescent) and broadening the arena of education to include people, places and events of the entire community—core principles of community-based art education—are applicable to any... art program" (p. xii).

Dr. Marilyn Zurmuehlen acknowledged and contributed to research affirming the need to recognize the role of art making as a vital part of life and culture, recognizing the "maker of art" as originator, transformer and reclaimer. Her early work with art education students and community-based art experiences in Missouri sought to make these concepts concrete and can be seen as laying the groundwork for reclaiming historical and aesthetic consciousness through art making.

In this paper, Dr. Zurmuehlen's writings will serve as the foundation for describing and understanding two unique community-based art education programs in the United States—programs which have transformed the lives of the young participants.

In 1991 Dr. Marilyn Zurmuehlen wrote "Stories That Fill the Center" for *Art Education.* In her article she examined the place of the post-modern artist in relation to the culture. Zurmuehlen (1991a) noted Gablik's assertion "that postmodernist artists reflect the culture more than they challenge it" (p. 6). She observed that resistance to this phenomenon—the emergence of alternative art modes in the 70's that sought impermanence and the dematerialization of the object: conceptual, process, antiform, earth, and performance art—initially challenged the capital-driven dilemma addressed by Gablik, but eventually, and with "a bit of ingenuity" (Zurmuehlen, 1991a, p.6), this art was also incorporated into the market system. As a result, Zurmuehlen (1991a) explained, artists think of their lives as careers and careers depend on networking, advertising, promotion, and the politics of public relations leading to "an emptiness at the center: artists in their own lives, centered on nothing but themselves, selves that, furthermore, are validated entirely through external credentials and assertions of manic productivity; and in society, deprived of art's possibilities for transcendence, for relatedness, as a frame for our questions and our identity" (pp. 6-8).

Reconciling the compartmentalization of living to "fill the center": to "look for a means by which we can approach art again as total human beings—not only with an aesthetic nature, but also with a moral nature, and with a philosophical and social purpose in mind" (Gablik, in Zurmuehlen, 1991a, p. 9) was a theme addressed not only in "Stories That Fill the Center," but in much of Zurmuehlen's work. She often offered as examples Kenneth Beittel (1991a, 1991b, 1990), Robert Irwin, (1990, 1986), Robert Bellah et al. (1991a, 1987), Robert Coles (1980) and many more, as artists, art educators and researchers committed to sharing experiences that speak to how humans seek to construct a sense of coherent self. Relating this journey to the practice of teaching art was essential for Zurmuehlen. The following accounts of two arts groups—each beginning a second decade of working together—illustrate this process and, much like Zurmuehlen's use of having students write personal cultural histories, demonstrate a way by which historical and aesthetic consciousness is recovered: by assimilating experience into life and work; locating a medium and style authentic to time, place and situation for student *and* teacher.

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Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) Background and Philosophy

In 1989 art critic Kay Larson wrote about the paintings of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. showing at Dia's West 22nd Street space. She described them as a phenomenon—an intrigue that seemed to justify the commotion they created in the star-obsessed art world of the eighties. She wrote, "Tim Rollins and K.O.S. is the moniker for a collaboration between a white-artist-teacher and his South Bronx high-school students, mostly 'learning-disabled' ...blacks and Puerto Ricans who call themselves Kids of Survival and who, in partnership, have created excellent—even, given the odds, slightly miraculous—art" (Larson, 1989, p. 123). Larson's statement implies a pedagogy of contradictions—a collaboration which has been studied, praised, and condemned.

Rollins came to New York from Maine in the mid-seventies, interested in teaching and making art. He received a B.F.A. from the School of Visual Arts and an M. A. in art education from New York University. In 1981 Rollins began teaching art classes in the New York City public schools to students categorized and labeled as "not educable." Almost immediately he observed that many of the students displayed some artistic aptitude and transformed his room into a working art studio. Not coincidentally, a transformation also occurred for Rollins concerning his ideas of what it meant to be an artist and teacher. He explained:

> I ceased being an artist who taught, and collapsed my artistic and teaching practices into one strange and stumbling hybrid. I made my art with the kids—during classes, during free periods, during lunch periods, in the short time after school allowed us before getting kicked out by the custodians. (Paley, 1995, p. 22)

In 1982 K.O.S. and the Art and Knowledge Workshop was officially formed, providing a vehicle to accommodate Rollins' unique approach to pedagogy and art making. Initially Rollins worked hard to locate the Workshop within the public school environment but soon it was apparent that this would not be possible. "Feeling constrained by the limitations of public-school schedules, overcrowded classrooms, and hierarchies of bureaucratic control, he turned the Workshop into a non-profit after-school organization" (Paley, 1995, p. 22). The Workshop's original location had been a gymnasium of an abandoned school remodeled into a community center. Rollins and K.O.S. are now located in an expansive studio space on the third floor of an old factory building on Barretto Street in the Bronx. Place—physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual—is an important element in the work of these artists. Their environment is a constant reminder of why each of these people have come together to make art.

Rollins' approach, to stress academic achievement—particularly literacy skills—by making art with his students, also acknowledges the complex social, political, and ideological factors which shape the lives of his students in the Bronx. Working first with standard school literature such as *The Red Badge of Courage, Animal Farm* and *The Scarlet Letter,* Rollins encourages his students to translate the themes of these texts (such as bravery, cowardice, discrimination, social stigma) through their own related experiences into visual images. What would *your* red badge or scarlet letter refer to and what would it look like? To bring a unifying element to the various images created during the collaboration, the group will decide on a unifying color, or dominant shape—superimposing the resulting images onto a canvas made up of individual pages from the book being studied. The images are not illustrations of the text but visual emblems of the written work understood through the realities of the students' daily existence. Therefore, the work often moves between the realm of universal understanding and individual privacy. Art historian Janet Kaplan (O'Brien & Little, 1990) explained:

> The works produced by Rollins and K.O.S. are not overtly political in terms of obvi-

> ously radical imagery. The symbolism of the various "scarlet letters" for example, is often too personal to be universally understandable. Rather it is their making of the art that is radical, that serves to overcome the silencing and humbling of illiteracy and cultural invisibility. (p. 120)

Throughout the art making process the students learn to turn the constant destruction of the South Bronx into something positive. Robert Storr (1989), New York critic and artist, wrote that one of the things K.O.S. does is "Tell us how mainstream culture looks to those who have been shut out. Paradoxically, they have achieved their voice by inventively paraphrasing the classics. ...Take the 'whiteness' of the whale in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*—the subject of a major work by K.O.S. and a rare instance in which white rather than black has stood for evil—and consider how differently it strikes children of color from their prep-school 'peers'" (p. 92). Take, for example, *Red Alice*, created by K.O.S. and Rollins between 1984 - 1987 and what three members of K.O.S. said regarding its development and their need to create (Lippard, 1989, pp. 94-95):

> We have a chance to make a statement, and for people our age this is a big chance. We paint what is, but we also paint what should be. *George Garces.*

> I guess art is one of the only ways we can show our point of view, about how we see the world. We don't own a TV station, but we can get a painting together. *Richie Cruz*

> The *Red Alice* means both anger and blood to me. This is funny, because red is also the color of love—like valentines. The *Red Alice* is a young girl who is so angry and in pain that she has had it and might jump out of the painting and fight back. The *Red Alice* is angry because of all the girls who are raped and hurt and killed because they are girls. *Annette Rosado*

As evidenced by their statements, K.O.S. and Tim Rollins have learned to see, to reflect, and to use the realities of the place around them to make art that is passionate, personal and pertinent. They are successful artists, and to do this they must rely on one another. Rollins is adamant about this:

> If we do it right students get into the habit of succeeding and getting positive attention so that any negative influence or criminal influence just doesn't have the attraction that it might have had if we weren't a part of each other's lives. I know this from experience. I find that every child is so individual and filled with potential. I have had kids who were told by school therapists and psychologists that they wouldn't succeed with me and they totally defied the odds. So I can only go with what I know from my genuine experience, but I really have a passionate belief in the possibility and contingency of the kid. And I think one problem with our society today is that we have made a variable industry out of telling kids what they cannot do, and neglected research on what kids *can do*. I have taken kids that were told they couldn't do anything, and look, we've got five kids in college—kids that almost every adult in their lives wrote off. So it is through the love of art; that's what you have to have; it isn't just me; it's that fact that we made a commitment and we're part of a real world dynamic that works (personal communication).

Zurmuehlen would have acknowledged that Rollins does not typify the connotation of "teacher" many students come to know in the usual educational situation: where, too often, the teacher is "the Subject of the learning process, the pupils are mere objects" (Friere, 1970/1996, p. 54). Engaged in what Schutz (1970) termed interactional relationships, Rollins acknowledges the role of mutuality and direct experience shared within a community of space and a community of time:

> It's about real communication. Nobody can be giving anybody anything. It's got to be an exchange. It can't be this white missionary savior giving these poor ghetto kids a chance. It's really about a kind of dynamic exchange that comes out of ethos *and* mutual benefit. We are involved in a cultural conversation in which we are having a genuine exchange which produces unique and original forms of art that

> would not have existed if we had not gotten together.
>
> It's about love—not sentimental love, not maternalistic love, not erotic love, but a love in which you are able to exchange gifts in the form of opinions—even world views—to create something new (personal communication).

The work of Tim Rollins and K.O.S. moves across place, time, categories. It ignores traditional boundaries used to understand and define teaching and art making. Annette, a member of K.O.S. in 1989, explained, "We *are* the art. We are a different kind of art. We're a team. We're a good example for people to learn from. We got it" (O'Brien & Little, 1990, p. 118).

Jana Napoli and YA/YA (Young Aspirations/Young Artists) Background and Philosophy

Shared experience within a community of place and time is evident in the work of YA/YA—Young Aspirations/Young Artists—from New Orleans. Like K.O.S. and Rollins, YA/YA emerged from a desire to recognize and deal with the realities of life.

Jana Napoli, a successful artist in New Orleans, occasionally noticed the students attending L. E. Rabouin High School, a vocational high school around the corner from her gallery and home in the center of the city, but never paid too much attention to them. After doing several hours of community service at a homeless shelter—requisite for a show she had been given in Lincoln Center—she realized that she could be putting her time and energy into her own neighborhood. Like Rollins, Napoli "stumbled" onto the notion of YA/YA when, in the Spring of 1988, she walked around the corner to Rabouin Career Magnet High School and introduced herself to Dr. Carol Chance, Rabouin's principal, and Madeleine Neske, Rabouin's commercial art teacher. This meeting resulted in a collaboration and the founding of YA/YA—an organization of artists and young African American high school students working to become self-sufficient artists acquiring professional experience and entrepreneurial skills.

The first YA/YA exhibition consisted of paintings of Rabouin High School. Napoli hoped that by inviting civic and business leaders to their first opening they could sell enough work to establish a studio and "get the word out" about YA/YA. The inaugural show netted YA/YA $1,800. Using Napoli's studio as a workshop and gallery, along with the income from the first show, the project was established and work began to define a structure for the group.

The imagery found on the chairs, chifforobes, screens and fabric created by YA/YA members is personal. It both acknowledges and refutes the narratives shaped by the circumstances encountered by these artists. As YA/YA Rondell Crier said, the work "depicts the things you find in life: pain, interest, love, the questions you have in life, the demands" (Barker, 1996, p. 59). The art studio manager for YA/YA acknowledged that members "create stories that come from the heart, and that's not always easy for teenagers. Some of them may actually make really beautiful things; it's a way for them to use fantasy to escape—and in a way deal with their own reality" (personal communication).

> When I started drawing Boonchee, my dreams began to express the way I think about life. Boonchee is a little black girl that believes in her heavenly father who takes her on many journeys. She befriends all types of mankind and beautiful animals and sees wonderful places. She is full of peace and happiness. If everyone could race with a comet on a magic carpet and float in the air light as a feather through puffy cotton clouds, they would be happy too. *Darlene Marie Francis* (Barker, 1996, p. 10).

Intense, personal narratives ignite the creativity of YA/YA members. Barker (1996) acknowledged that when Napoli first suggested to the YA/YA's that they paint their hopes, concerns and questions, she "not only gave them an assignment, she gave them *permission* to search their souls for an experience and a set of feelings that could be made into art" (p. 20). For Napoli, painting images on second hand furniture also served another reason. "I wanted something they (the students) couldn't fail with," she said (NEA, 1997, p. 1). And they didn't. The work produced by the YA/YA's has garnered critical acclaim. They have established a fabric printing workshop; had a chair design selected for inclusion in the Hammacher-Schlemmer catalogue; have been commissioned to do numerous murals throughout the country; designed two limited edition watches for the Swatch Corporation; designed numerous posters for businesses and educational institutions; and the list goes on.

After ten years of existence, YA/YA, like K.O.S., continues to help adolescents produce art and sends students to college; however, further comparison of K.O.S., and YA/YA acknowledges two very different philosophical and pedagogical approaches to art. The conceptual and technical formation of their art work is also dramatically different. And yet, there is a unifying element. Both have changed lives and turned stereotypes upside down.

Filling the Center

K.O.S. and YA/YA are involved in "conversations about things that matter to their participants" (Bellah et al., in Zurmuehlen, 1987, p.142). Presented as examplars, these stories of success offer a pedagogy Paulo Freire (1970/1996) insisted "must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed" (p. 30). Through their art work these adults and adolescents are involved in a dialogue, a dialogue requiring reflection and action leading to praxis. Freire (1970/1996) described it as: word = work = praxis. This praxis "fills the center." It is an encounter between people, mediated by the world, in order to name it, and has the potential to transform the lives of those who choose to participate. These young adults are "individuals, sovereign, on their ways, constructing meaning in their lives" (Zurmuehlen, 1986, p. 36).

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