

Plazabilities for Art Education: Community as Participant, Collaborator & Curator

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In the following article, a plaza metaphor and theories of plazability are applied to the recent work of three “Other” art educators to acknowledge, examine and articulate a refreshed vision for an art education based in community pedagogy which expands possibilities, builds community, and uses art to work for social change. Examples suggesting such achievements in creating plazability include work from a community artist backed by a visionary community arts foundation, a progressive cultural museum director and staff, and a contemporary artist each actively engaging the community in diverse ways. The innovative and community grounded practice and philosophies of these “Other” art educators suggest new possibilities for art teaching and learning through making a transfer to collective authority in the art classroom and call for the creation of new discursive spaces within art education practice.

A Plaza Metaphor

While spending significant periods of time in Mexico, Spain and Italy over the past decade, I was both impressed and extremely jealous of the many public spaces that seem to freely exist for myriad public use. The characteristics of the plaza as a free and aesthetically intriguing space make them intensely desirable destinations or thoroughways for tourists and residents alike. Every city and town abroad it seems, no matter how grand or small, offers gathering sites in their plazas which are appropriate in number and size for each locale. It is as if supply of citizenry equals demand for plazas (Whyte, 1980). Some are simple with just a few benches, others are fringed with sculpted trees, crowned by lampposts or accented with tiled fountains, and still others hold intriguing contemporary public art. These physical spheres of public space, free of many social controls

(Whyte, 1980) provide people, all people, a place to be, to sit and rest, mingle, imagine, and dream. I am consistently refreshed and reinvigorated by visiting plazas great and small. I am freer in these spaces in other countries because I feel in communion with others, even strangers, within these environments of plazability.

In this article, this plaza metaphor and articulated theories of plazability are applied to the recent work of three “Other” art educators (Congdon, 2005) to acknowledge, examine and suggest a refreshed vision for an art education based in community pedagogy (Keys, 2003) which expands possibilities, builds community, and uses art to work for social change. Congdon’s (2005) contextualization of “Other” art educators involves this scholar’s recognition of the valuable art education and life lessons taught informally to her by working with and learning from folk, outsider and self-taught artists. Borrowing Congdon’s reference, I broaden it to include three diverse cultural workers including a community artist backed by a visionary community arts foundation, a progressive cultural museum director and his staff, and a unique contemporary artist. These individuals acting as informal art educators “implement and radiate pedagogical and philosophical practice” (Keys, 2005, p. 188-189). Consequently, the innovative and community grounded practice and philosophies of these “Other” art educators suggest new possibilities for art teaching and learning through making a transfer to collective authority in the art classroom and call for the creation of new discursive spaces within art education practice.

These examples reiterate what formal art education should offer its students—rich and compelling content, active communal participation in creative pursuits and real examination of important social issues. The projects described are worthy for curriculum inclusion within K-12 and higher art education as subjects of study, discussion or adapted replication and/or as inspiration for other teaching and learning plazabilities. As the article unfolds, learning

contributions and specific ideas for application within K-12 or university art education teaching are shared.

Provocative questions suggested by these examples include: What if art education regularly included community-based interactive art that generates social participation? What if it became typical within art education curricula to provide learning experiences to connect people to one another in a larger community context through the creation, display and character of an artwork or cultural exhibition? What if art education consistently addressed cultural identity, civic participation, and the creation of lessons, programs, or projects that fight for social justice?

Connections to Plazability in Community Arts & Art Education

There is much discussion in the community arts practice-based literature (Baca, 2002; Cieri & Peeps, 2000; Cleveland, 1992) exploring projects that create or reclaim the lost and free spaces of interaction in the United States. Work that uses the arts to manifest social change in part is dedicated to the subtext of creating or reclaiming free spaces for dialogue, meeting and interaction. Similar to the creative potential of the plaza, Baca (2002) and Kilkelly & Leonard (2003) indicate, both literal physical spaces and metaphysical free spaces are created in projects involving parks, murals, theater and other places through arts processes.

Although, within the formal field of art education, theoretical and practical interests within art education relating to community connections and partnerships¹, community arts², community-based art education³, arts-based community development⁴, and community pedagogy⁵ have steadily increased over the past fifteen years, myriad opportunities for increased adoption, utilization and exploration of these types of art education practice for all age levels are still largely untapped (Keys, 2007).

Building a Theory of Plazability

The historical nature of the public square is to intermix persons and diverse activities (Sennet, 1978). In the United States of America, however, as Baca (2002) notes, these public spheres of activity are seemingly limited. During the mid to late twentieth century citizens began to become isolated and faced a gradually unbalancing private life and an empty public life in part due to formation of a new capitalist, secular, urban culture (Sennet, 1978). As increases in material wealth began to develop among immigrant families and communities—and individuals relied more heavily upon capitalist systems, community dependency greatly lessened. The once prevalent and extremely diverse “multiplicity of contact points by which people entered into social relations with the city” soon withered as upward movement in material wealth was matched by social withdrawal (Sennet, 1970, p. 56). Greater financial security led to the extreme independence of the family structure and creation of self-support systems no longer in need of sharing resources of all kinds with community members. Additionally, the family appropriated the social functions and contacts once sought out in the greater community and city (Sennet, 1970). Earlier demands for sharing resources and constantly negotiating space, rules and social behavior ensured an active system of lived community (Sennet, 1978) among people living in close proximity. This guaranteed that daily life was indeed a journey between various diverse groups dependent upon open connections with one another even in non-harmonious or warring times (Sennet, 1970).

Conversely, the increase in the “physical arrangement of life in suburbia is viewed as promulgating extreme privatization and a dysfunctional public life, scattering residents without providing central places that encourage social interaction” (Talen, 2000, p. 345). Gradually, social interaction and forums for social exchange in society were simplified as technological and bureaucratic systems became readily available and accessible (Sennet, 1970).

In contemporary times, Trend (1992) cites the continuation of a “precipitous erosion of communal spirit” (p. 82) based in part on the rise of corporate capitalism in the 1980s and its equating of wealth with virtue. This reality leaves less vision for civic responsibility in our society, and “[w]hen public life and public space are lacking or neglected, people become isolated, eroding any sense of communal spirit and cohesion” (Slessor, 2001, p. 36).

In New urbanism, the American urban design movement arising in the 1980s, the need to revive civic importance in urban planning principles by creating public space (Hochstein, 1994; Kunstler, 1996) is stressed and “many of its design prescriptions are predicated on the role of public space in promoting resident interaction and sense of community” (Talen, 2000, p. 347). In addition to offering proximity to others and opportunity for contact in an appropriate space for interaction, public space “provides a venue for chance encounters, which serves to strengthen community bonds” (p. 347). The provision of shared open spaces, pedestrian walkways and other gathering places (such as plazas) play a strong role in once again strengthening the cultivation of a “living community” (Christoforidis, 1994). Additionally, Hayden (1995) posits that provisions of good public space help to foster a sense of cultural belonging while also leading people to acknowledge and respect diversity.

In planning for cosmopolis, which involves a revival of inquiry about and appreciation for the existence of the city as sites for memory, desire and the spirit or sacred, Sandercock (1998) suggests the:

need for a diversity of spaces and places in the city: places loaded with visual stimulation, but also places of quiet contemplation, uncontaminated by commerce where the deafening noise of the city can be kept out so that we can listen to the ‘noise of the stars’ or the wind or water, and the voice(s) within ourselves. (p. V)

The field of art education can work in myriad ways toward building plazability by simply stepping out of the classroom or inviting others into our teaching and learning worlds, to reclaim or create new literal and metaphorical plazas where social interaction, the building of community, a return to communal dependence may start to take shape. Innovative pedagogical approaches similar to those shared here use art to work for social change, recreate a multiplicity of contact points in and around art making with the community, and reinvigorate a sense of communal spirit for those involved.

Community-Based Interactive Art Generating Social Participation

What if art education regularly included community-based interactive art that generates social participation? Projects sponsored by grants and other fundraising efforts from the Black Rock Arts Foundation (BRAAF) must carry this goal of interactive and artistic social participation. One recent literal physical space making and metaphysical free space creation project was David Best's *Hayes Green Project-Temple*.

From June until November of 2005 an ornate Thailand inspired temple lived at the center of the new Hayes Green, a brand new and previously empty plaza in the Hayes Valley area of San Francisco. Funded by BRAAF and the San Francisco Arts Commission, David Best and his crew built this temporary installation in the spirit of previous temples created by Best at the annual Burning Man festival in the Black Rock desert. "Best's 30'x30' gazebo-style temple structure placed in the center of the green space was made largely from recycled materials, and offered a focal point at the center of the Green for community celebration and reflection" (BRAAF, n.d.).

Temple held a certain aesthetic majestic power and actively drew people in as they encountered it. Quickly after its installation, people made marks and tags, left messages and favorite quotes, and wrote

poetry or lines from songs with markers or pens onto the simple wood-like surfaces. Some participants also built small mixed media altars within and on the uneven layers of the temple structure.

On an initial level the project emphasized community, environmental stability and art made from recycled materials which in turn echoes the city of San Francisco's commitment to sustainable, livable communities. As time passed and *Temple* continued to serve as a nexus for free and creative expression, it became mainly cherished or despised as a new local community landmark. Many residents in Hayes Valley did not appreciate it as a work of active community art, but even more residents and countless visitors saw *Temple* in other exciting ways.

Plazabilities of David Best's *Hayes Green Temple*

The plaza metaphor is easy to contextualize here as the project quite literally took place in and assisted in the physical development of a new plaza. During the project people interacted with the space, through it and with each other. People perused the markings, drawings, collages, and offerings left by others and presumably left some markings themselves. *Temple* stood on the Hayes Green intensely encouraging the public to participate in this collective and celebratory artwork. It brought layers of peacefulness, intrigue and joy into the space.

David Best's work achieves plazability by focusing its energies on possibilities rather than limitations. It convincingly communicated that we are all creative and welcome to create. Best provided an accessible blank slate where the spirit, intentions, and creativity of participating people were housed in a single structure. Additionally, the work challenges the obstacle of artistic production norms in our society. For many, this was the first time they had entered into a free creative situation in which results would immediately be viewed by others. It may have been the first time they encountered an invitation

to join into a creative practice or to freely examine artistic responses made by others outside of established gallery or museum structures.

Best's project calls us to repeat and build on his foundations. To actively create temporary and permanent plazas of creative production, to enliven space with cross-communal communication, and to provide encounters with the delightfully unexpected. It would truly be amazing if the sharing of collective creative and exhibition space became habitual or commonplace. The results being that young people saw this activity as usual, expected and a baseline within art education for building communal and creative activity.

Temple Applications

Moving beyond a "build it and they will come" philosophy art educators need to stretch themselves further than the making of murals as community projects and think of new ways to build metaphorical or literal plazas for collective art production. Educators also need to embrace organic processes and uncontrolled endings in community related works—waiting with others to see just what could and will happen in projects like *Temple*. Facilitating the subversion of maker and viewer in community may yield true unfettered collaboration. Teachers may take these ideas one step further and facilitate community and collective design and decision making throughout the entire project—rather than just in an invited process or response.

Curatorial Plazabilities

The innovation of a communally shared curatorial impulse is ripe for experimentation in many art education contexts. Art educators (Ballengee-Morris & Keys, 2001; Blandy & Congdon, 1993, 1988) have theoretically and practically explored and engaged in local community oriented curatorial practices within the realms of the university gallery or museum environments. The next two

plazability examples broaden and deepen the idea of community as both collaborator and curator and lend great ideas for continued art and cultural education practice for all levels by inviting the community to fully participate in exhibition visioning, planning and implementation.

Connecting through Creation, Display and Character

What if it became typical within art education curricula to provide learning experiences that connect people to one another in a larger community context through the creation, display and character of the artwork or cultural exhibition?

Harrell Fletcher

In 2004, artist as public intellectual (Becker, 1995) Harrell Fletcher, asked two intriguing questions making a ripple in the norms of a high art world tradition. “What if the artworld were based on a socialist system instead of a capitalist one? What if the goals we were shooting for were sharing, equality and mutual support, instead of competition, rarefication and celebrity?” (Fletcher, 2004). He answered these provoking questions with his contributions to the *2004 Whitney Biennial Exhibition*.

His artistic response in addition to two displayed videos was the facilitation of ten small exhibitions in and around the burroughs of New York City in cafes, a drug store, a boutique, a library, and other unusual locales. The artists were people who had never exhibited their artwork or readily identified themselves as artists, and the curators who had only a month to organize each small show were university student volunteers from Fletcher’s course at the Cooper Union School of Art. In the actual Whitney Biennial Exhibition space a generously sized, Fletcher-published newspaper entitled, *This Container Isn’t Big Enough: A Project for the Whitney Biennial and Socrates Sculpture Park*, containing a map and listing of all the community exhibition sites

throughout Manhattan, Roosevelt Island, Brooklyn and Queens, was printed for exhibition attendees' perusal and potential use in what some might call a Whitney Biennial alternative gallery hop.

A New York Times reviewer and "hop" participant captures the essence of Fletcher's unique project:

After a day of trekking around the city, looking at modest drawings on notebook paper, it occurred to me that the art on display—as charming as it is—is not the point of this project. Rather, these off-site exhibitions were catalysts for a chain of social interactions between the students, the artists and local residents who might otherwise dismiss contemporary art. (Fineman, 2004, p. 48)

In direct relation to Fletcher's own artistic research questions above, this collaborative work exemplifies an art education pedagogy tied to social justice investigations. In an active sharing of resources, Fletcher keeps an up to date website⁶ complete with free, open and shared chronicling of his artistic ideas for new projects as well as documentation of his various and intriguing completed projects, exhibitions, and videos.

Plazabilities from Harrell Fletcher and *This Container...*

By simply teaching students about the open and intensely creative and community oriented artistic practice of Harrell Fletcher, young people are exposed to an artist who approaches art making and exhibition in important innovative ways. By jumping the shark of the staunchly traditional context of the Whitney Biennial, he has at least temporarily shown us all that there is indeed more room in the world for art by ordinary people. Here he illustrates the point also that there is more to art than what is *in* the museum. The plazabilities evident in Fletcher's work include sharing resources, dialogue, community interaction, and collective production. Within

the specific Whitney Biennial project—Fletcher extended the potential plaza of the Whitney Museum out of its doors and into the community. The Whitney Biennial also becomes his collaborator in building a broader—freer plaza. He added the consideration of other citizens' visual works to an extended mapping of art making that should be honored and considered regularly.

Fletcher's *This Container...* project achieves plazability by focusing its energies on possibilities rather than limitations. In his process he shared the curatorial power and exhibition spaces with many, collaboratively facilitating a web of exhibition throughout NYC—building up rather than containing, inviting people in rather than shutting them out or reinforcing the normal barriers of entry into the New York artworld. From Fletcher's honest and non-pretentious approach to art and life, educators and young people can learn to build plazas and communities, to get the work out and to do really ingenious things in the spirit of sharing creative ideas and celebrating artistic production and working with the community as collaborator.

This Container...Applications

Inspired by Fletcher's work, educators may facilitate the scouting by students of any and all forms of creative expression in their school, neighborhoods and community. Next, alternative ways to display these expressions in alternative venues beyond the gallery and museum could be determined. Pushing further than shows in the local coffee shop, downtown windows or the library, students could investigate opportunities to curate exhibits with and for people at the laundromat, car wash, grocery, barbershop, dry cleaner, pet shop, etc. This subversion of traditional gallery and museum protocols by the Whitney Museum and Fletcher negates the idea of individual artist as genius and instead commits to sharing the exhibition stage with ordinary people—serving as a reminder about the importance

and existence of creativity in our society.

With older students, educators may challenge classrooms to propose compelling new collective approaches and artworks to local or regional juried exhibitions in more formal venues—to again reverse the roles of curator, artist and audience.

Cultural Identity, Civic Participation, and Social Justice

What if art education consistently addressed cultural identity, civic participation, and building programs or projects that fight for social justice?

Ron Chew and the Community as Curator

Recruited in 1991 to direct the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, Ron Chew was recognized in 2004 with the Western Museum Association's Director's Chair Award and as The Ford Foundations', "Leadership for a Changing World" award winner. In addition to making significant gains in the organization's fiscal health over the past fifteen years—Chew's now seemingly institutionalized directorial vision has included an innovative approach to curatorial practice. This method for visioning, planning and implementing cultural and historical exhibitions is based largely on the importance of oral history and the stories of the local people from Seattle's International Chinatown district. The approach combines "cutting-edge presentations with a locally oriented emphasis on social justice" (Swarzer, 2004, para. 5). In several recent oral history based exhibitions, Chew invited the local community to the curatorial table. This invitation was not just for local citizens to participate in a steering committee or a brainstorming session, but rather to fully engage in cultural exhibition curatorial processes. These community members were invited as full and equal partners not just as assistants or to occupy an advisory board. Chew facilitated large scale ongoing local community generation and implementation of an exhibition

vision for the 2001 *If Tired Hands Could Talk: Stories of Asian Pacific American Garment Workers* exhibition. He set up a volunteer committee of current and past women garment workers and their children who “collected oral histories, gathered display materials, and designed an exhibit to illuminate the untold story of Seattle’s hidden past, the legacy of its immigrant garment workers” (Swarzer, 2004, para. 6). Surfing the exhibition archives of the Wing Luke Asian Museum website⁷ one finds documentations of numerous amazing community curated cultural exhibitions.

Plazabilites from Ron Chew and the Wing Luke Asian Museum

The work of Ron Chew and the Wing Luke Asian Museum actively navigates a reversal of cultural loss and erasure of once greatly endangered oral histories and local knowledge by seriously collecting stories of the people. As an added layer—it is the local people who are learning to do the collecting and the sharing cultivating new traditions of voicing, shared empowerment and strong cultural identity and pride. Ways of life, stories and experiences are brought to life and vividly shared in the exhibition process and in the actual ongoing museum exhibitions. In these ways, Chew and his staff actively build and continually enlarge a plaza formation expanding possibilities, building community, and using art and cultural exploration to work for social change.

Ron Chew’s example achieves plazability by focusing on possibilities rather than limitations. His recently earned high profile awards solidify hope that others may follow in his footsteps in making these cultural plazas even richer, stronger and larger. Indeed by mentoring and training a veritable generation of young museum leaders who have all worked or interned at Wing Luke Asian Museum, he has both institutionalized this process and formed this approach as habitual for many emerging cultural workers.

Ron Chew and Wing Luke Asian Museum Applications

Inspired by Ron Chew and the community curatorial approach of the Wing Luke Asian Museum, educators for all levels may consider involving students in issue and oral history research with community informants. Important skills can be learned by facilitating community decisions about what is important to explore, create artwork for or about, and to exhibit in relation to collected research. Pushing further, like Chew, students may invite community members into their planning and investigations and count them as equal partners in the community project at hand. Final work could be displayed at school, local community centers or other alternative locations—and stress the importance of narrative, life story and oral history collection among diverse generations.

Reflections on Subversions and Reversals of Power

The three examples reference cultural workers who are working from positions of power as funded community artist, director/curator, and established contemporary artist. In the accounts of their recent work, interesting instances in which power relations and expectations have been overturned or reversed, when things that are normally not done, are done readily exist. Each cultural worker implements a system of shared authority and power in contexts in which this does not usually happen. These approaches are also key to building plazability in art education.

In addition to the engendering of community, New Urbanist writers (Sandercock, 1998; Whyte, 1980) reference the freedom from social controls and hierarchical power, the opportunity for anonymity, and possibility of becoming a stranger in city public spaces as other strong points. Brill (2001) adds that:

[i]f Public life offers a freeing from control by the social structure of kin, neighbors, institutions and the state, it is also a social leveler, an equalizer of power inequities, at least

temporarily and locationally, and because access is relatively free, it is a generally accessible freedom. (p. 54)

Brill (2001) discusses that state, corporate and or other social control mechanisms [such as museum protocols and the education system] oppose one another in the public sphere, but stresses that this “can only happen when citizens have and welcome a wide diversity of opinions, can confer in an unrestricted fashion, have freedom of assembly and association and freedom of expression and publication of these opinions” (p. 54). As hooks (2003) articulates, when we stop analyzing along traditional lines of socialized hierarchy, and “can value rightly all members of a community we are breaking a culture of domination” (p. 37). The three explored examples echo this break in cultural domination by allowing new answers to emerge regarding questions such as, Who can be an artist? Who can exhibit in the Whitney Biennial? And who can make and curate culture and cultural history exhibitions?

In a call for educators to foster a transfer to collective authority and combat the tendencies of traditional art education to over emphasize individuality and competition and thus artistically alienate students, Trend (1992) calls on teachers to instead cultivate a consensual environment in the classroom. “When youngsters receive collective authority for the execution of work, art class can become a laboratory for the practice of democratic decision making” (p. 92-93). All three cultural workers exemplify consensual environments in the presented projects and provide forums for community decision making.

Trend (1992) also suggests:

[o]ne needs to ask how cultural producers can evaluate ways of working that dislodge conventional roles of maker and viewer, in effect encouraging audiences to be active producers of texts rather than passive receivers of them. How can artists and writers help validate the culture that people produce in the

course of their daily lives? (p. 137)

By asking the general public to use their own experience to create, contribute to, or curate community art or cultural documentation places them in positions of collective and shared power and leadership. The shared examples reverse the traditional artist/audience, and curator-director/audience dialectics by positioning the audience as collaborating artists, educators, and curators. These good examples and best practices of making the transfer to collective authority in art and cultural settings, show us it is also possible to facilitate this shared power into formal educational environments.

New Visions for Art Education Practice

Checked against the plaza metaphor and criteria for achieving plazability, these examples remain inspirational for art education. Educators can take ideas or approaches to create plazability in their own teaching. Educators need to go outside the venue of the traditional art classroom and/or invite a collaboration with the community inside school walls to encourage plazability. Educators can work to create similar discursive public spaces with K-12 as well as pre-service art teachers to subvert or reverse the traditional roles of artists, curators, and directors in community art projects. Staying informed about local, national and international current community arts endeavors and arts based community development projects (Keys, 2007) can provide additional resources and glimpses for art teachers into what is possible.

Art teachers for all levels should embrace facilitative approaches to reverse, subvert, or otherwise question traditional power relations in art making, viewing, teaching, and learning whenever possible. Creating opportunities for roles of maker/viewer, curator/receiver, and teacher/student to be reversed—or taking steps toward establishing collective authority in art class for project beginnings, process, decision making and final display or exhibition is paramount. It is

“incumbent upon radical educators and artists to assist reconstituting an arena for civic dialogue by validating the significance of a people’s culture and recovering the public function of art” (Trend, 1992, p. 105).

Conclusions

The aforementioned examples from David Best and the Black Rock Arts Foundation, Harrell Fletcher’s Whitney Biennial project, and Ron Chew and the Wing Luke Asian Museum illustrate the idea of generating plazabilities within art and cultural work and likewise provide new visions for plazability within art education practice.

Communities, art teachers, artists, scholars, and other cultural workers are challenged to rework the presented examples of community as participant, community as collaborator, and community as curator into innovative curricular designs and implementation at all art education levels. David Best and BRAF call for art education to regularly include community-based interactive art that generates social participation. Harrell Fletcher’s work encourages art education curricula to provide learning experiences to connect people to one another in a larger community context through the creation, display and character of exhibitions, and Ron Chew and the Wing Luke Asian Museums’ curatorial approaches suggest that art education address cultural identity, civic participation, and the creation of lessons, programs or projects that fight for social justice.

Working for an art education yielding plazability is a worthwhile endeavor for facilitating socially relevant learning in classrooms and communities. The characteristics of the plaza as free, unencumbered and as an aesthetically intriguing space which expands possibilities, builds community, and uses art and culture to work for social change are intensely desirable for art education tourists, residents and students alike.

Endnotes

¹Community connections and partnerships: Irwin & Kindler, 1999; La Porte, 2004; Marche, 1998.

²Community arts: Adams & Goldbard, 2002; Burnham & Durland, 1998; Ewell, 2002.

³Community-based art education: Bastos, 2002; Ballengee Morris, 1998; Ballengee-Morris & Keys, 2001, 2004; Blandy, Bolin & Congdon, 2000, 2001; Daniel, 2003; Keys, 1998, 2003.

⁴Arts-based community development: Cleveland, 1992, 2002.

⁵Community pedagogy: Keys, 2003, 2005.

⁶<http://www.harrellfletcher.com>

⁷<http://www.wingluke.org>

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