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Creating Art Environments that Address Social Justice Issues

Gail Tremblay
The Evergreen State College, USA

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Abstract

In this article, I examine strategies for teaching students to make socially conscious art using a variety of media that emphasizes installation work. I present issues of social justice in the contemporary art world and include concerns of censorship that artists sometimes confront. I offer examples of team taught coordinated studies programs where students did social justice through visual art installation work and refer to examples I have used as part of curriculums to teach students the skills needed to create and exhibit works about important social issues. The paper contains links to images of works by the author on Vimeo and lists and links to other artists who that people might want to include in their curriculum.

Introduction

Many students interested in learning to make art enter college with a very narrow sense of the range and scope of work that politically engaged artists have been creating in the international art scene over the past fifty years. Even students who grow up in urban areas where it is possible to go to museums and galleries have frequently not been exposed to works outside a narrow canon that is quite conservative in its vision even when the artworks they see are technically and conceptually *avant garde*. As a result many students have no sense that they can create artwork that could cause viewers to question the status quo.

Positioning Myself

As an indigenous artist whose work by its existence supports the survival of Native culture in a settler state that has a history of attempting to commit physical and cultural genocide, I have always known my art is political. Beyond that I have chosen to participate in an innovative contemporary art movement and to address certain highly charged political issues like Indian Fishing Rights or the effects of nuclear pollution on reservations in my personal installation work, I have also chosen to collaborate with other artists from a variety of cultures to address issues of feminism and issues of water and water rights (Tremblay, 2001; Tremblay, 2002).

Pedagogy

If one wants to open doors for students and encourage them to make art that challenges the injustices that are a defining feature of our social reality then, as a teacher, one needs to do three things. First, show students works by successful artists who make art that challenges social inequality and teach them to use art to communicate. Second, model ways to create work that is socially engaged and show them how to find sites for exhibiting such work. Third, raise questions about students' works that suggest directions they might explore that will cause viewers of their art to reflect on social realities and the need for a just society. In the process of teaching students to create work that addresses social issues, it is also essential to design assignments that will teach students the skills they need to use a variety of media effectively so that their work will attract curators and viewers and cause those people to take the time to explore the meaning of the art made by young emerging artists.

Moreover, in order to make art about social justice, a person must become aware that the world is unjust, and must be willing, not just to witness the injustice that exists, but to find visual strategies to address that injustice in ways that raise questions for both artist and viewer about the need to make changes in social reality. For students who have suffered injustice this may be more obvious than for students who benefited from the status quo. However, in a world where the environment is being destroyed by corporations, all people are suffering from a system that is threatening the sustainability of life on the planet. Even those who profit most

from the current social system are in danger of suffering because of it, and so can come to a conscious sense of the need for change.

In order to become socially engaged, an artist must examine the world and interrogate not only his or her own personal experience, but must study issues of inequality of power caused by a wide variety of social practices. As a person comes to understand the functioning of economic systems, of problems related to the overuse or lack of access to resources, social constructions related to notions of 'race,' histories of colonialism and underdevelopment, and of exploitation of one culture by another, one finds lots of issues about which one can make art. Some artists may also want to question inequities around issues of gender and sexuality and more personal topics. In doing this work, the artist must recognize that many people are taught a variety of rationalizations to attempt to make inequality seem not just 'normal' but 'natural,' and so when an artist questions inequality and defines it as unjust and in need of change, s/he starts a complex dialog with viewers of his or her work. In order to create art that addresses issues of social justice, one must enter into a sophisticated critique of ideas that are used to support privilege for people in power and to harm and violate those who are not.

Caveat

At times it can be dangerous to make art that raises issues of social justice and speaks to the need for social change. In repressive cultures and places, making such work takes real commitment. Even in a permissive society like the United States that promotes free speech as a constitutional right, one often has to navigate an art world that practices censorship. It is also important to know that in art world discourse, often work is censored because it offends the taste of gallery owners who are marketing work to conservative people with power. There are some gallery owners, curators, and critics that support the status quo and who dismiss politically engaged works of art as lacking quality. At times the quality of a socially engaged work may be no different than other works included in a particular exhibit, and yet work will be rejected. This can be hard for a young artist. It is important to help students recognize that the world is very complicated and there are those in all arts professions, and collectors in all social classes, who work to make social change and who support artists who do the same. Students who desire to make art should be encouraged that it is possible to negotiate both the national and international art world, and to use their work to speak passionately in favor of issues of social justice.

When one asks student artists to address issues of social justice in their work, one not only needs to define social justice, but teach students to question why in a capitalist society people in power have defined art merely as an object of beauty or have pursued 'art for art's sake.' Many teachers in the academy have denigrated the art of the 'social realist' tradition as propaganda and have taught that artists should not be concerned with issues of justice.

According to people who espouse such conservative, aesthetic philosophies, socially engaged artists are considered unnecessarily political and so are forced to confront negative critiques of their work. Since art in Western culture has a long history of being a consumable commodity, if one decides to create engaged art, in certain circles it might affect an artist's ability to make a living. Indeed, it is important to address such issues directly when expanding the definition of what art is legitimate. A teacher needs to realize that it is these conservative ideas that have kept students' definitions of art narrow and helped keep them unaware of the wide range of subjects related to social justice that have been explored by artists during the late 20th and early 21st Centuries.

In order to address issues of social justice, the art created must use imagery or symbols in a way that allows the viewer to interpret the meaning of the work. When one teaches students to create art that is socially engaged, there are many different media that can be used from the most traditional to the most innovative. Certainly when Goya chose etching to create his series, *Disasters of War*, (Goya, 1810-20) he was working in a medium with a long history in European artistic tradition. He chose to use that medium to make a commentary about the horrors of war in order to critique social reality.

It is not only the media or the style of artwork that makes art socially engaged, but above all the content of images and the thoughts those images must provoke if the viewer is to gain a sense of social awareness. When teaching students about these issues, I find they enjoy discussing the film *The Cradle Will Rock* (1999) by Tim Robbins, particularly the scenes where Rockefeller confronts Diego Rivera about painting Lenin in the mural in Rockefeller Center. Students have interesting insights into the incident where Nelson Rockefeller has the mural destroyed and the subsequent conversation between Rockefeller and Hearst about their support of abstract expressionism and painting without political content as a way to reshape the art world. It is important to discuss the tension between works inside the conservative canon of Art History that re-enforce the status quo and the equally powerful works of socially committed artists who are left out of some texts and not others.

Installation Art

As a mixed media artist who has used fiber, metal, wood, dirt, stone, sand, painting, bones, photography, audio, and video to create installations

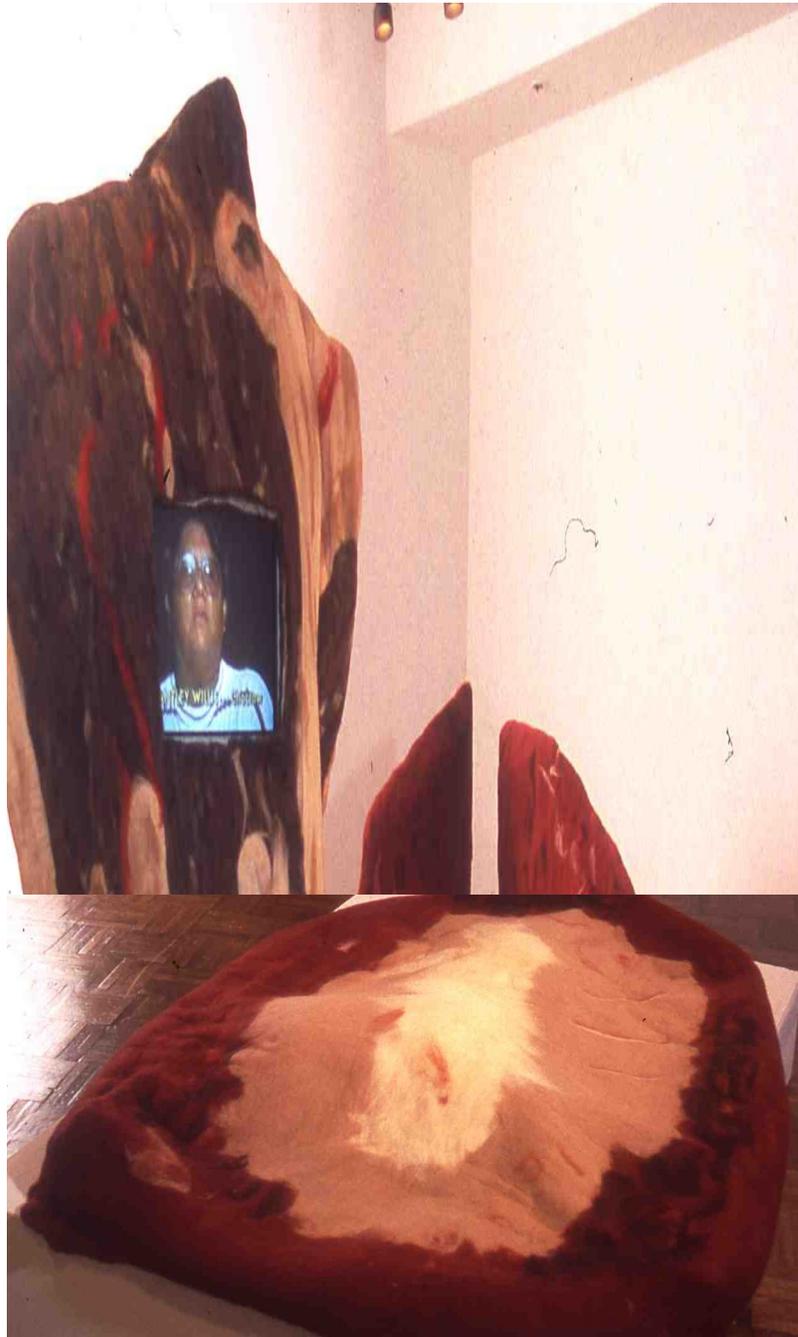


Figure 1



Figure 2

I like to teach my students to use time based, multimedia installation art as a medium for doing works of art that explore issues of social justice, cultural diversity, environmental racism, gender equity, and other social justice themes. Installation art allows students to create an environmental space that the viewer can inhabit and explore.



Figure 3

Moreover the use of time-based, video and audio tracks or performance elements allows artists to weave sound, language and image together in order to create a more multifaceted experience for the viewer. There is also a substantial body of installation work by a diverse group of artists from which one can select examples when designing curriculum about making art that explores issues of social justice. Time-based, multimedia installation art also allows a teacher opportunities to teach students how to develop skills they need to use a wide variety of materials, and to do collaborative as well as individual works of art.

I have worked with artists from China, Puerto Rico, and Mexico as well as the United States, I am therefore able to model for my students the process of creating work that addresses issues about which I want to have viewers think so they can consider whether they want to act. I show students DVD's that document my work, or during certain programs I will install and exhibit a work in the gallery on campus or take students on a field trip to a gallery where my work is being exhibited. I also have students read reviews and book chapters that discuss my work, so that students can learn how a professional artist they know functions in the art world. When students realize that my work is shown nationally and internationally, they begin to ask questions about how to show their work, how to write grants to support the work they

want to do, and so it becomes easier for me to teach them to take their own work seriously and to think of art as a way to raise questions for viewers that will make them think.

The Evergreen State College

Integrated and Collaborative Instruction

As a faculty who has taught for thirty-two years at The Evergreen State College, an institution dedicated to doing collaborative, team taught, interdisciplinary studies, I have had the opportunity to work on faculty teams with social scientists, scientists, humanists, film makers, and dancers, as well as with other visual artists. This has allowed me the rich experience of planning and teaching students to make art in academic programs where they actively studied, did research, and built skills in a variety of disciplines. Students in such programs were in touch with a wide variety of subject matter that they could explore as they decided what themes they would address in their art. While it is true that it is possible to teach students to do socially committed, multimedia art projects teaching by oneself, and I have done it at the college level, it is easier to work with students full time in the generative environment of a team taught, interdisciplinary, academic program. Such an academic program supports innovation and encourages students to do research and address ideas that confront real world inequities at the same time that they are learning the skills needed to create art.

One of most successful programs I taught in the past decade was called “Transforming Consciousness: Multimedia and Installation Art in the Americas. I team taught this two-quarter program with a Latin American Studies faculty, and during winter quarter, I took students to Mexico for six weeks. During two of those weeks, students created a collaborative installation with Professor Patricia Soriano Troncoso’s students from Centro Nacional de Arte (CNA), and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). Our students created a collaborative installation work called “*Fronteras en mi lengua/Borders on My Tongue*” that was exhibited in the student gallery at CNA. Their work explored issues around immigration and policing the U.S. – Mexico Border, issues of Development and the Macquiladores, and Mexican resistance to genetically modified food among other themes. Students divided the gallery up into several rooms, and some of the students performed giving the work a time-based element. My colleague at Evergreen took another group of students to Chile where they did various media and community research projects. During the quarter prior to traveling, students in the program were divided into two groups, one that did multimedia installation projects and one that did video production and programming about Latin America for TCT TV, a local community television station.

To prepare the students for doing work in both groups, we read works about Latin American history including works by Galeano (1979,1986), Freire (1969), and translations from Ceballos (2006) on the history Latin American immigration to the United States that

examined a variety of issues and put them in historical context. Students read about Latin American art including Mosquera (1995), *Beyond the Fantastic Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, Mosquera and Block (2001) *Cuba Now: The New Generation*, and Canclini (2005) *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. We had students watch a variety of films on social conditions in Latin America. They also viewed films and read about socially engaged works of installation art in the U.S. and in Latin America. Students examined works by Fred Wilson, Ann Hamilton, Pepon Ossorio, Jesusa Rodriguez, Alfredo Jaar, Luis Camitzer, Guillermo Gómez Peña, Coco Fusco, Violeta Luna, Roberto Sifuentes, Amalia Mesa Bain C Maxx Stevens, James Luna, Corwin Clairmont, Shelley Niro, Jolene Rickard, Hulleah Tsinahjinnie, Flo Oy Wong, Suzanne Lacy, and Imna Arroyo.

We also invited Imna Arroyo (1995/2007), a gifted Puerto Rican artist and professor, to come and do an exhibit in the college gallery, She installed a work that she had done about the Middle Passage and cultural survivals in the African American Diaspora. She not only talked to the students about her own work and evolution as an artist, but came to a critique of their work and gave them excellent and thought-provoking feedback. Students were exposed to artists from a broad range of ethnic backgrounds including artists of European ancestry working in both the United States and Latin America who dealt with a broad range of themes that related to issues of social justice. The artists were highly skilled both technically and in terms of the conceptual elements of their work.

After studying a variety of work, each student created a personal installation work due week five of the quarter, and did a collaborative installation work with three to five students due during week ten. Students also did proficiencies using tools in the wood and metal shops, the fiber studio, the costume shop in the theatre, and the media center, Students were expected to have plans and a statement describing the themes of their projects due before the end of week three and week eight, and were encouraged to ask questions and work with me to build skills needed to complete their work. Students doing installations were then divided into two groups and assigned a day to install the work. All projects were to be installed between 8AM and 11 AM in the morning and then, critique lasted from 11 AM until noon and 1 PM until 5:30 PM and each critique lasted for thirty minutes.

While student projects were only up for one day, they were installed in public spaces and posters and invitations went up around campus to encourage people to examine the work. We spent two full days for critiques, and all students wrote an artist statement to contextualize their work. We discussed both the concept of each installation and viewers' ability to understand the themes and the aesthetic dimensions of the work. Students wrote five-minute commentaries on each work to give to the artist before we began discussions. Individual

works allowed students to build skills using materials, and made each student design a work that dealt with a theme that explored issues related to social justice. The collaborative projects allowed students to learn to work together to realize their theme and prepared them for the group work they would do with students in Mexico.

Students in this program were required to take course work in Spanish, although many of them were beginning language students, so I arranged for translators to help the students from the United States and the students from Mexico with translation problems. A few of the students from my class were fluent Spanish speakers, and they also helped others communicate. During the trip to Mexico we visited museums, ruins, performances, art galleries, traditional markets where indigenous artists and artisans sold their work, as well as making and exhibiting art in a variety of settings besides doing the collaborative installation in the Student Gallery at CNA. Students studied the work of artists who were known for work that spoke to issues of social justice like Diego Rivera and David Siqueiros. They met several artists like Manuel Velásquez (2012) and Daniel Romero whose work was powerfully political. They also came to understand the complexities of race and class in Mexico as they traveled around Mexico, D.F. and other cities in the states of Tlaxcala, Puebla, and Veracruz.

When designing curriculum, the most difficult thing for me to do has been to talk about my personal work in the classroom. Even though I have shown my work nationally and internationally, I have always worried about becoming too much the center of attention in the classroom. I want students to develop their own voices and styles and not to copy what I do. When my colleagues first asked me to talk about my work in academic programs, I was surprised and a bit uncomfortable. It was only when I began to realize that I was only one example among other examples that I was teaching students to explore that I became more comfortable. It pleased me when students began to recognize that if I could show work and help them make contacts in the art world, they could also do professional work in the arts if they worked hard to develop skills and to do powerful work. Indeed it was my contacts with artists in other countries and my ability to access commitments from galleries that allowed me to set up opportunities for my students to have their first international exhibits. Given such an opportunity, they felt driven to do work that addressed topics that were thought provoking and that addressed themes they had been studying in our program.

More Examples of Student Work

Over a long career as a teacher, I have had many students who have done outstanding works, and many have gone on to graduate school in the arts and other fields and done important work. When I reflect on student projects that have been generative and thought provoking, I remember in particular a suite of work by Ken Matsudaira who I have invited back in several programs to install environments, perform in them, and lead class discussion. His suite of

work about the effects of Japanese Relocation on subsequent generations of Japanese Americans and particularly a work he created called *Don't Make Waves* talks about the need to be vocal in the face of injustice. By questioning the notion that one should not make waves in the face of various unjust social conditions he explores the importance of acting against injustice.

Among other student works, I think of one collaborative feminist work done in the woman's bathroom with a powerful series of life-sized plaster figures that explored forces that silence women and disempower them. I was also particularly moved by a personal, installation work by Soledad Picon about illegal immigration and the U.S. Mexican Border, in which she used candles to outline an altar-like space inhabited by objects and photographs on the floor. In each case the students clearly defined a theme and developed imagery and language to address the issue. Often times, student work is as sophisticated as work I find in galleries and museums, and if that is the case, I will suggest that students submit their work for exhibit. There is nothing that teaches students to do work committed to issues of social justice like getting their works exhibited and seen.

Helping students make connections

I am always looking for galleries and museums that are doing and documenting exhibits that deal directly with issues of social justice. Sometimes I write for catalogs and help to document socially committed work by artists. Gathering information from a diverse community of artists helps me to design curriculum that encourages young artists to commit to creating works that address injustice. Students respond to having role models and are less frightened to take the risk to work for change. They learn that art can have a social purpose in the world and raise questions for viewers about the need to act to create a more just world.

The interdisciplinary nature of the full time academic programs my students take allows them a supportive environment when they choose to do work that raises important questions about the place of justice in the world. It is rewarding to watch students develop images and installations that work to make the world a better place as they shape the art world of the 21st Century. Art 21 (2005) has done a series of videos that are available for classroom teachers about Pepón Ossorio, Anne Hamilton, John Feodorov, Alfredo Jaar, Do Ho Suh, Carrie May Weems, Fred Wilson, Nancy Spero and Ai Wei Wei.

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About the Author

Gail Tremblay is an artist, writer, and cultural critic noted for multi-media visual works, art installations, writing on Indigenous Art, and her poetry. She teaches at The Evergreen State College in visual arts, writing, Native American and cultural studies. She was a member and president of the National Board of the Women's Caucus for Art. She has exhibited art in Switzerland, China, Mexico, the Czech Republic, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and in 100 exhibits throughout the U.S. Her work is collected by the National Museum of the American Indian, The Portland Art Museum and the Missoula Art Museum among others.

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