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## Teaching “Art as Social Justice:” Developing Prefigurative Pedagogies in the (Liberal) Art Studio

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### Abstract

In an era of expanding global capital, our role as educators remains one in which we must confront the ever growing discrepancy between the North and South, including the South within the North. Through my experiences teaching a course called “Art as Social Justice,” I begin to situate my classroom labor within an emancipatory framework that *prefigures* a more just and equitable world, as well as a classroom that challenges inequality. Employing thick description, this essay investigates “Art as Social Justice” as a case study that employs specific pedagogical tactics to challenge hegemonic social relations, not only in the classroom, but outside it as well. As the essay explores, visual art enables different ways of dealing with issues inaccessible to political science, history, sociology, or even literature.

## **Introduction**

Art enables a way of thinking about issues that other inquiry-based approaches do not allow. It is through the teaching of art that new spaces of critical inquiry and social potential may be established. As artist-activist, Brett Bloom (n.d.) writes in “Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance,” we must not coalesce to capitalist modes of making and exhibiting art, but instead must establish alternative practices and infrastructures to enable a sustainable future for non-market-based arts practice. Since commencing a tenure-track position at Michigan State University in 2007, I have attempted to engage student-artists<sup>1</sup> in this process through a course entitled “Art as Social Justice.” The course, which I have taught three times over the past five years, addresses art from an interdisciplinary and overtly anti-capitalist perspective. By drawing on my own work as an artist, historian, curator, and critic, I hope to engage student-artists in non-traditional artmaking infrastructures as a way to initiate thinking about the possibility of new and better worlds. The class is intended to present art as a particular modality to think through building a more just society.

Employing thick description, this essay investigates “Art as Social Justice” as a case study of how we employ specific pedagogical tactics to challenge hegemonic social relations, not only in the classroom, but outside it as well. In addition to my analysis of “Art as Social Justice,” I also bring my experiences teaching an array of other courses and workshops dealing with art and social justice. These include, among others, a study abroad seminar on art and activism, taught in Oaxaca, Mexico; a doctoral seminar on art and anti-colonialism; undergraduate seminars on “Art and Activism”, as well as other university courses and community-based workshops with Indigenous and Latina/o youth. While not directly addressed in the text, these additional pedagogical experiences directly influence my own pedagogical strategies as inflected in “Art as Social Justice.” Through these multivalent experiences, this essay illuminates how and why radical artistic practice is needed within the university, as individual and collective methodologies that can develop prefigurative pedagogies and radical teaching practices, concepts I will explore herein.

My development of prefigurative pedagogies as an activist teaching practice is founded in the

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<sup>1</sup> In this article I use the term “student-artist” to refer to those students enrolled in the course “Art as Social Justice.” By using the phrase “student-artist”, I hope to identify the complex nature and dual identities of these individuals. The term implies the potential power embodied in both the process of learning (student), as well as in the process of making (artist).

ideas of prefigurative politics, an anti-institutional tactic initially described by sociologist Winifred Breines. As a scholar of social movements, Breines (1989) is interested in the ways that activist organizational frameworks were commonly linked to a group's larger struggle to dismantle oppression and social stratification. She writes that "the term prefigurative politics is used to designate an essentially anti-organizational politics characteristic of the movement, as well as parts of the new left leadership, and may be recognized in counter institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics. Participatory democracy was central to prefigurative politics" (6). She continues: "The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that 'prefigured' and embodied the desired society" (6). Similarly, prefigurative pedagogies take this into the classroom and other sites of teaching and learning. Prefigurative pedagogies are anti-hierarchical and predicated on participatory learning.

Unlike many of my art historian and studio colleagues, I teach in a residential college (a liberal arts institution housed in a research university) and have been able to exercise a level of intellectual and pedagogical autonomy that may not be possible for those teaching in traditional art history or studio departments. Specifically, I teach undergraduate students in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities (RCAH), a newly created living-learning environment housed at Michigan State University (MSU). Established in 2007 to fill a humanistic void in undergraduate liberal-learning at MSU, RCAH focuses its curriculum on four cornerstones: arts and culture, world history, ethics, and engaged learning. At the core of the curriculum are transcultural studies and community-based civic engagements. This unique teaching environment has afforded me the opportunity to develop heterodox teaching methodologies that employ otherwise non-traditional course offerings.

### **Cambio Social Radical**

In many ways, the projects in my courses begin to dismantle the barriers between art and politics, as articulated in the words and actions of *Mujeres Creando*. Accordingly, the Bolivia-based anarcho-feminist artists' collective formed in 1992 by Julieta Paredes and María Galindo, contend that "*No hay un cambio social radical, que nos haga felices, que no sea creativo*" (Gaitero, 8). For *Mujeres Creando*, "there cannot be radical social change, at least that which makes us happy, which isn't also creative." In the classroom, a site where we are striving for "radical social change," creativity is centrally positioned and enables students to see the relationship between creativity and the possibility of a new (and more enjoyable) world.

What strikes me most about this quote, which is included in the course syllabus, is that *Mujeres Creando* uses the concept "radical" in a way that serves as a double signifier, one

paralleled in my own teaching of “Art as Social Justice.” Initially, Mujeres Creando envision the “radical” in “*cambio social radical*” as relating to the root or base structure of society. That is to say, that social change must emerge at the grass roots or “radical” level. This parallels the Angela Davis’ assertion that “Radical simply means ‘grasping things at the root’” (1987). Moreover, Mujeres Creando, which literally means *women creating*, has constructed their use of radical in alignment with the way that we commonly use it in the Global North<sup>2</sup>: a fundamental and systemic rupture.

The manner that the anarcho-feminist collective positions creativity as central to any basic social transformation is likewise foundational in how I come to situate my teaching about art, visual culture, and social justice. As a self-identified anarchist-artist-historian, I have commonly seen my own artistic practice disparaged by activists who position creative labor as somehow less significant and worthwhile than the “real” work being conducted in the realm of politics and economics. My experience is similar to MacPhee and Reuland (2007) who write that “As anarchists, we have seen our politics denigrated by other artists; as artists, we have had our cultural production attacked as frivolous by activists” (3). From this outmoded perspective, art is simply a superfluous activity with which one engages during leisure time, while politics and economics are the location where true activism is found. While the readers of the *International Journal of Education & the Arts* may quickly disagree with this reductive construct of cultural work (after all, teachers are cultural workers), its discursive circulation is very much alive within many activist and progressive circles. However, through the use of activist-art in the classroom, I believe that we may begin to dismantle this untenable perspective. This is something I have both learned from and shared with student-artists.

### **Teaching “Art as Social Justice”**

Student-artists are generally willing to engage with questions on the efficacy of art and how it may spark radical social change, even if they are uncertain of their own responses. On the first day of class, student-artists in “Art as Social Justice” are confronted with the syllabus, which cites both Mujeres Creando and Subcomandante Marcos (spokesperson for the Zapatistas, the Maya resistance in southern Mexico), figures unfamiliar to most students in the

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<sup>2</sup> *Global North* is a term used to describe the so-called “developed” nation-states that presently serve as economic and cultural super-powers. The *Global North* is contrasted with the *Global South*, terms that evoke the very real geographic disparity between the northern and southern hemispheres. In a post-Cold War era, the term has generally replaced notions of First, Second, and Third Worlds, although, as Vijay Prashad (2008) notes, the Third World project is very much still alive. In much of my work I continue to use the terms Third World, in reference to the non-capitalist and non-State socialist nations, and Fourth World, in reference to global Indigenous nations.

Midwest. During that initial interaction, many students are shocked to "discover" that Indigenous people are still violently oppressed; yet simultaneously enthralled by the notion that groups of people, particularly the Zapatistas, can resist power, while refusing to replace one form of hierarchy with a different, yet similar, social order. Following a discussion of these figures and their importance on our own lives in North America, student-artists create a series of *theses on art* that we habitually rework during the semester.

Each time I have taught "Art as Social Justice" my personal theses have been included in the syllabus, positioned between the course description and course objectives. What I included in the syllabus read as follows:

01. Art is an alternative to the mechanization of contemporary life;
02. Art offers a specter of humanity in an alienated existence;
03. Art cannot be learned. Art must always be practiced;
04. Art is the questioning of "traditional" models;
05. Art is the production of human relations;
06. Art generates transformation;
07. Art enables heterodoxies;
08. Art is social justice;
09. Art is resistance;
10. Art challenges.

By thinking about the unorthodox and malleable nature of art, the student-artists engage the larger social functions of art at its most basic level. These theses are intended to challenge student-artists' own ideas, while establishing a matrix to understand the multi-functionality of visual art and its role within our own lives.

In "Art as Social Justice," student-artists work collaboratively with one another to produce a series of stencils, relief prints, and serigraphs, as well as a project based on Social Practice (Willis, 2008), what others have named either Socially-Engaged Art (Helguera, 2011) or Relational Aesthetics (Bourriaud, 1998). By working this way, student-artists evoke the tangibility of the printed form in a way that narrates an anti-capitalist aesthetic domain. By collectively creating hand-printed objects, student-artists begin to transcend the closed parameters of market orientation. Through this process, student-artists create work intended for public circulation and therefore become cognizant of the discursive power of their artistic and socially-engaged activities. Within the classroom, I provoke student-artists to critically interrogate their own roles as both consumers and (cultural) producers, identities that many are initially uncomfortable with, having grown accustomed to a life of media consumption. By connecting what they create in-class with global and local art historical and practice-based

traditions, student-artists begin to see how and where they fit within a living and changing world, one unlike what they commonly see in the media. For instance, when making stencils, student-artists create *public artworks* that engage a particular self-selected audience in a unique and situated environment. To do so, the student-artists must begin to understand the “power of place,” as Hayden (1997) would maintain, by interrogating local and urban history, as well as understanding to whom they are speaking.

In another assignment, student-artists create a large stencil addressing a poignant social issue. In addition to actually creating the artwork, student-artists must also produce a map (and possibly photographs) of the location where they would (hypothetically) paint the artworks. Student-artist projects have ranged from issues of food justice, globalization, Indigenous land sovereignty, Latin American and Middle Eastern solidarity, gender and sexual politics, and the infringement on civil liberties, to name only a few. The origin of these ideas develops in collaboration and conversation with one another. By making artworks that address particular issues they find pressing, student-artists circulate their work in pre-existing signifying systems that they do not fully control. In response, they begin to see how, as social actors, they may initiate minute interventions in a world they otherwise do not control. In turn, they are empowered enough to create more challenging and ambitious works.

While confronting their own pre-existing ideas about art and social justice, we also work on multiple artworks, such as serigraph (screenprint) posters and mural projects. The serigraph poster project is one based on the model of the Celebrate Peoples’ History (CPH), a poster series curated by Josh MacPhee of Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative (MacPhee, 2010). As a body of work, CPH brings negated historical events, communities, and individuals to the visual consciousness of contemporary youth. Printed in two-color designs, the offset lithograph posters are frequently seen wheatpasted in urban centers across North America, Latin America, and Europe. As posters, the CPH series combines text and image in an informative and pedagogical fashion that serves a dual aesthetic and activist function. Recently, MacPhee compiled these posters into a book, which serves as an excellent educational tool. Personally, I have created three CPH posters, one each on Métis resistance in Canada, the Flint Sit-Down Strike, and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.

With these political posters in mind, student-artists create stark serigraphs, ranging from one to four colors (based on student-artists’ past experience in the medium), attending to unique social issues or radical individuals and historical events. To date, serigraphs have engaged issues as diverse as femicide in Mexico, the early-twentieth-century state-assassination of anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti, solidarity with various peoples’ movements, Indigenous struggles, as well as referenced progressive musicians such as Dead Prez, Bambu, and Manu

Chao, to name some of the most memorable projects. In my courses on poster art, projects vary with additional and more open parameters.

### ***Challenges of relational or socially engaged art***

In addition to the print-based focus initiated during the second offering of the course (2009), the first iteration (2008) included a unit on social practice, relational aesthetics, socially engaged art, or collaborative art. Relational art, although seen as a highly problematic term and genre, are artworks in which human relations serve as the primary focus of investigation (as opposed to the usual fixation on aesthetics). Nicolas Bourriaud (1998), author of *Relational Aesthetics*, writes that relational art is “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space” (14). He continues, arguing that relational art “points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art” (14). Pablo Helguera considers Socially Engaged Art an inter- or trans-discipline that is constituted by “a meaningful interaction or social engagement” (2). He writes, “what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence” (2).

Due to the collaborative and relational nature of much activist art, it seemed natural to encourage student-artists to work both collaboratively and relationally via social practice. In this way, I imagined that creating socially engaged or relational art would help student-artists develop a working-model for a world we were trying to create by working directly as a community of artists. However, those student-artists enrolled in the course did not arrive with the theoretical or aesthetic apparatus to think of art in such amorphous and performative ways. Since this course is offered at the 200-level (the second year within the college curriculum), student-artists were grounded in a more traditional art historical foundation, possibly a remnant of artmaking they learned in primary and secondary school. In this way, student-artists commonly viewed art as firmly located within the closed parameters of drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, and printmaking. Different outcomes and expectations could be expected from art students, instead of those enrolled in a liberal arts program.

My intention to immerse student-artists in socially engaged or relational projects was challenging, at best. Initially, student-artists showed little interest in pushing their own pre-existing boundaries when defining what is considered “art” while they remained enthusiastic to get into the very “real” process of making objects and images. With these initial resistances to social practice, I decided to remove the unit on socially engaged art the second and third time I taught this course and, instead, focused exclusively on print media, an area I am quite comfortable with in my own work. Throughout all three courses, however, collaboration remained central to classroom dynamics and peer interaction. When teaching the course in the future, I am interested in again using socially engaged practices within the classroom. In

fact, as a way to establish a knowledge of relational art for liberal arts students in my college, I recently offered a first-year seminar titled “Art and Activism: Socially Engaged Art and Social Practice” (2012).

### ***Further course development***

Structurally, “Art as Social Justice” is organized into four key units, each focusing on a different method of cultural work. The first time I taught “Art as Social Justice,” I organized the course around 1.) public art; 2.) relational aesthetics or social practice; 3.) political printmaking; 4.) and collective artmaking. With my initial failures to engage student-artists through relational artworks, I decided to reframe the class in a less theoretical manner and concentrate on methods of studio practice, as opposed to larger genres and functions of the work. As such, the second and third time I taught the course I incorporated “less dense” readings and concentrated on the political uses of various print media, including 1. stencils; 2. relief prints; 3. serigraphs or screenprints; 4. and monoprints.

Intellectually and pedagogically, I am drawn to the structure of the first course for its interrogation of diverse ways of employing artistic inquiry. However, the easily tangible media-based (stencils, relief printmaking, serigraphy, and monoprinting) organization was preferred by the student-artists, who universally understood the transitions between and across these four units. Ideally, before teaching “Art as Social Justice” again, I plan to retrieve an additional organizing framework that incorporates the positive aspects of each previous structure.

In addition to the larger course structure, individual class sessions were likewise divided into one of three types: 1.) seminar-style discussions of theoretical and historical material; 2.) workshops where student-artists actively prepared and created their projects; 3.) and student-led critiques. During the first workshop meeting, we attempted to establish the collective nature of the course, a complex and challenging task to do in an environment mediated by the pre-established inequality of the university classroom. While I recognize the obviously inequitable power dynamics between student and professor, student-artists and I struggled to dismantle the preconceived relationships throughout the entire semester and beyond (continuing into non-academic settings, such as the local anarchist infoshop and other activist and gallery situations off-campus). What became an interesting pedagogical query is how teachers/professors may integrate non-academic social relations created in activist and public spaces into the university classroom. Working prefiguratively, that is acting in a way that “prefigures” new relationships and models of sociality, the project of integrating outside modes of social relations evoked both successes and failures, which I have seen throughout my short career as a professor.

The main determinant to successful prefigurative pedagogy has to do with the willingness and openness of students to dialogically embrace the instructor as a mentor or peer, as opposed to as their superior (and power holder of their grade). In my courses these practices took several faculty-initiated forms from ways of conversing with students to methods of meeting in a "safe space" (not always asking to meet in the professor's uncomfortable office). Accordingly, student-artists and I reciprocally struggle to make the classroom democratic, while maintaining a positive and productive learning environment.

This prefigurative practice became an ongoing creative project that seemed to function as an actual socially-engaged artwork, at least for me, if not for the student-artists. In the "Art as Social Justice" syllabus, I openly clarify the *horizontality* of the course by facilitating student-artist competence to share his or her personal and pre-existing skills and knowledge with everyone in the workshop, including me. Attempting to dismantle the traditional deficiency model, which presupposes that students are lacking in knowledge and/or skills, I likewise make clear in the syllabus that "we will all envision ourselves as knowledgeable artists" and must openly share our knowledge with those around us.

By establishing the course in a way that allows for collaborative work, I envision the workshop to function as the prefigured space where we already live the world we want to see. This does not always function ideally, as anarchist anthropologist David Graeber (2002) points out, because students (and myself) commonly revert to hegemonic schooling, intellectual, artistic, and social models. Nonetheless, while student-artists are engaged in active-learning through artmaking, their capacity to transcend binary teacher-student structures seems to be more attainable than I have experienced when teaching about art and activism in traditional lecture or seminar-style courses. What this illuminates is the power of art-based learning to facilitate an egalitarian classroom that directly contests hegemonic forms of higher education learning.

In the intermediary time between its first, second, and third offering, I have toyed with readings and modified the inclusion or exclusion of specific texts. Initially, the class focused heavily on historical and theoretical material, with artmaking the third side of an equilateral triangle. Whereas student-artists responsively engaged with historical writings, which they found approachable and accessible, the theoretical work intimidated student-artists in a way I had not expected. This intimidation frequently allowed students to intellectually disengage from the material and not fully complete assigned readings, leaving classroom discussion unfulfilling.

In turn, when I taught the course in 2009 and 2010, instead of theoretically and densely-written tomes, I employed a wonderfully illustrated text on printmaking, as well as a

compendium of writings about socially-engaged art. Moreover, essays like Brett Bloom's (n.d.) "Radical Space for Art in a Time of Forced Privatization and Market Dominance" were added, as were podcasts (Badatsports.com, 2012); videos (*Retooling Dissent*, 2003); blogs (justseeds.com/blog, 2012) and a short book by the Midwest Radical Culture Corridor (2008). These varied materials, each approaching activist-art in a language and media that students-artists were comfortable with, served to complement what they commonly saw as boring academic readings.

### ***Class privilege and collaboration***

As cultural workers, teachers and artists are commonly forced to recognize and question privilege, be it based on class, race, gender, sexuality, language, citizenship-status, or a combination of these factors. How we engage our students in these same conversations seems to be one of the omnipresent pedagogical challenges of working within the university. In a "classless" society, as the United States is habitually presented, this becomes even more challenging, as does teaching about the seemingly meritocratic sphere of art. Engaging students in discussions of class within the corporate-colonized university proves to be one of the most complicated pedagogical interventions with which I have engaged. Since artists and cultural workers must continuously mitigate their own complex positionalities, as well as those of their constituencies, I am adamant that these issues be addressed in classroom discussions and studio critiques.

Since my teaching operates across fine arts and humanistic boundaries, it is through active learning, that is the creation of artworks and theory, that we begin to rectify the absence noted by Sheila Cavanagh (2009) who writes that "A number of active-learning practices gaining increasing attention in the academy receive scant notice in English and other humanistic fields" (135). By both learning about historical and theoretical material, as well as actually making artworks, active learning stimulates student-artists to critically reflect upon their roles as both consumers and producers. Nonetheless, students are often quite unrefined in their capacity to engage in class analysis. One of the unwritten objectives of "Art as Social Justice" is to begin these conversations.

As Drabinski (2009) notes "structures of social and economic class are notoriously difficult for students to see, laboring as they do under the powerful myth that America is a country of endless opportunity, where anyone can triumph over obstacles to be anything they want to be" (15). Furthermore, cultural critics Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2008) write that "Most Americans, when they are not thinking of themselves purely as individuals, regard themselves as part of the 'middle class'" (89). They expand this by arguing that

The myth of the middle class is invented to obscure the fact that 'we' (black or

white, man or woman, gay or straight, etc.) are all wage-workers, and, therefore, 'we' are 'all equal here' because, as Marx puts it, 'middle and transitional' levels of social differences 'always conceal the boundaries of classes' (89).

Recently, while teaching a freshman course on "transcultural studies," a class in which I primarily focus on Indigenous cultural practices in the face of ongoing colonialism, I conducted an assignment where students classified their class identity and located the key factors that allowed them to associate with this class identity. Not surprisingly, the *entire* class identified as either middle-class, upper middle-class, or upper-class, categories that they themselves created. When interrogated as to why they identified as such, students commonly fell back on class "demarcators" such as income, cultural capital, ability to go on vacations, and the like. While many of their parents and family members work(ed) union jobs, some in the automotive industry, they themselves did not distinguish themselves as working-class, yet at times placed their family members and neighbors in this category.

This, of course, has immediate implications when thinking about our roles as artists, activists, educators, and students. Although I have yet to conduct such an assignment in "Art as Social Justice," with approximately three hundred students in my entire college, I believe that similar class identities can be extrapolated for those student-artists enrolled in "Art as Social Justice."

One way that I confront this class myopia developed when student-artists were working on a mural project with a local neighborhood center. For the mural, for which we were only able to create preparatory drawings, student-artists were asked

to tell the community stories of [a particular neighborhood], be[ing] cognizant of representing [...] community histories. Moreover, as a public work of art, be prepared of understand the public dialogue and criticism that this work may engender.

As we have explored and will continue to discuss in this class, community murals come from a long tradition of community-based artmaking being used a political tool for the disenfranchised. As such, we must be aware of the history of community murals and how (outside) artists may work in solidarity with community members. Remember that the mural should demonstrate your skill as an artist, but also represent the people and ideas of the Eastside. You may need to engage in library, web, and oral history research in the process of planning this mural.

Very few student-artists had engaged in library or archival research or had researched materials on the web. Noticing this absence of preliminary research, student-artists and I engaged in collaborative classroom discussions about the role of the artist, privilege, the academy, and local histories. During this discussion, one student-artist, who has since become a history major, was poignant when she asked: how can I design a mural for a community in which I do not live? In general, the question about the artist-as-outsider remained unanswerable, but shaped the way student-artists attended to the project.

Oakland-based artist, Rodríguez (MacPhee and Rodríguez, 2008) addresses this type of issue head on in her essay in *Reproduce and Revolt*. In this artist-activist handbook, Rodríguez writes:

Another question that should be addressed openly among activists is: What's your role as an artist/designer when your audience is NOT the community you're from? For example, what if you are a conscious white male designing a piece to get young women of color involved in stopping gang violence? In a case like this, it's important to be mindful of representation. Invariably, the decisions we make as artists about WHO to depict and HOW to depict them reflects our complex identities and sometimes our blindspots (built around class, race, gender, sexuality and life experiences). It is important for an artist who feels outside of a community to build collaborative relationships with community-based organizations or others engaged with that population. This means time and work, but it also means you took steps to understand your audience (20).

While student-artists were “aware” of these issues, convincing them to directly confront them remains an eternal challenge in our work as educators, one I consistently struggle with in the classroom. Since Rodríguez was an artist-in-residence at my college during the first offering of “Art as Social Justice”, and briefly visited during the second offering, she was able to personally workshop this issue with student-artists. By semester's end, student-artists began to understand the issue intellectually, yet they were not always capable of disavowing their own class, gender and/or White privileges. Of course, intellectually acknowledging privilege is the initial step, one that may be expanded through continued prefigurative pedagogies. Through creative and solidarity-building projects, student-artists affirm their affinities with other individuals and movements, as well as their own privileged status.

### ***Prefigurative pedagogies***

By working in a *prefigurative* manner, an approach I hope to define in this final section, I see my role inside and outside the classroom as one who facilitates egalitarian and utopian change through the creation of and thinking about the arts. Just as the political tendencies of *alternative modernism* have waned, borrowing from Marxist art historian David Craven (2006), so too have the methods that teachers employ to facilitate change in the classroom. When dealing with students who have never seen a successful revolutionary project, activist-educators must be comfortable making small, incremental shifts, when working with students. Instead of massive upheavals or ruptures, we must be content to foster everyday victories marked by small and incremental classroom movements. For me, I see these triumphs in the moments when students identify their creative output as “art” or, better yet, when they begin to actually see themselves as “artists”. This small self-identification is crucial, as new identities open new and revolutionary possibilities. Moreover, identifying as an artist emerges from a uniquely emancipatory perspective and liberatory artistic project.

By facilitating the classroom and studio as a collaborative and prefigurative environment, artmaking functions to both help initiate radical change in addition to actually operating as the change itself. According to Graeber (2002), prefigurative politics are “very much a work in progress, and creating a culture of democracy among people who have little experience of such things is necessarily a painful and uneven business, full of all sorts of stumblings and false starts...” (72). Along these lines, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or Wobblies (2002 [1905]), the radical labor union that gained prominence in the early twentieth-century through various direct-action tactics and unwillingness to coalesce to the demands of the capitalist class, serve as another prefigurative example. As the Wobblies maintain in their constitution, they struggle to create “the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”

With radical practitioners such as the IWW (2002 [1905]) and Graeber (2002) in mind, prefigurative pedagogy suggests alternative universes within the educational setting. Moreover, by laboring within existing structures, prefigurative pedagogies seek to establish a new and emancipatory environment in the *classroom of the old*. As teachers or professors teaching in mainstream institutions, we may be unable to control the parameters of the institution, yet we may nonetheless imagine the classroom as the utopic space we want it to be.

In the same way that prefigurative politics are messy, with many ineffective moments, so too will work in prefigurative pedagogies present failures in the process of making the classroom an open and non-hierarchical space. Even so, teaching prefiguratively (however, we may envision that act) allows us to imagine the classroom and its associated tactics and/or

strategies in a way that existing structural limitations may otherwise prevent. What this means is that in the process of making the classroom non-hierarchical, we will experience countless situations that replicate the horrors of the world around us, while experiencing the joys of an unforeseeable environment.

As an artist and art historian teaching within the university, I find these prefigurative tendencies informative and ones that allow me to situate my own pedagogical practice within an anarchistic and anti-capitalist terrain. Influenced by anti-hierarchical and Indigenous epistemologies, I see the artist as an individual who (through collaboration) possesses the capacity to not only spark fundamental social transformation, but also *envision* the possibilities of a new world. Unlike traditional modes, art allows access to otherwise incomprehensible “ways of seeing,” to paraphrase John Berger (1990). On the one hand, visual images can easily concretize complex and difficult political ideals, while the collaborative process of making art challenges outmoded assumptions of the solitary artist.

In fact, the work of Maori theorist, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), is a model for the core of any prefigurative pedagogy by outlining an array of “projects” that invert dominant modes of being. In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Smith presents “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects” as fundamental to decolonizing the present state of knowledge production<sup>3</sup>. In this vein, her unique positionality allows us to explain how these twenty-five projects are crucial, not only to Native communities and their reclamation of Indigenous knowledge, but simultaneously consequential to decolonizing mainstream classroom pedagogies. Although I teach primarily to non-Native students, three projects have nonetheless become foundational within the hybrid studio-classroom of “Art as Social Justice” and therefore have greater implications to radical teaching in general.

In “Twenty-Five Indigenous Projects,” Smith (1999) outlines a selection of projects that may be evoked to change the colonial and capitalist stature of knowledge production. In the classroom, the projects labeled “intervening,” “envisioning,” and “creating” all serve as modes of inquiry intended to challenge hegemonic knowledge systems and their control of the political system. With these ideas at its base, student-artists use their artworks to function as *creative interventions*, which *envision* a new and otherwise unknown social world. Through

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<sup>3</sup> Smith’s twenty-five Indigenous projects serve at the center of the growing anti-colonial reclamation of Native knowledge production. The ideas include the following: claiming, testimonies, storytelling, celebrating survival, remembering, indigenizing, intervening, revitalizing, connecting, reading, writing, representing, gendering, envisioning, reframing, restoring, returning, democratizing, networking, naming, protecting, creating, negotiating, discovering, and sharing.

prefigurative pedagogy and the inclusion of Smith’s Indigenous projects, the classroom begins to function in a way that counters a legacy of oppression and alienation, something we all need.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, visual art enables very different ways of dealing with issues inaccessible to political science, history, sociology, or even literature. By evoking prefigurative pedagogies, I have attempted to use art as a mode of creating a more socially just world, both inside and outside the classroom. While “Art as Social Justice” has been riddled with strategic failures, I continue to develop the course by using incremental and tactical adjustments to help better align the class with its ambitious and important goals. Through my ongoing experiences, I hope to share some thoughts on art as both a mode for instigating radical social change, but also serving as the change itself.

Dominant modes of thinking and working often lead to the reproduction in hegemonies. By evoking particular non-canonical thinkers and methodologies, particularly those drawn from the Global South, our roles as educators who incorporate visual art within the classroom allow us to appropriately construct the classroom as a collaborative and prefigurative environment, one based in a collaboratively created framework. From Mujeres Creando’s thoughts on the function of radicalism to Graeber’s notion of prefiguration and Smith’s Indigenous projects, radical intellectuals throughout the world have been conceptualizing and thinking through emancipatory practices (and pedagogies) for quite some time. In an era of expanding global capital, our role as educators remains one in which we must confront the ever growing discrepancy between the North and South, including the South within the North. Through my experiences of teaching “Art as Social Justice” I struggle to situate my classroom labor within this unique liberatory framework in a way that prefigures both the world I want to live in, as well as a classroom that challenges inequality. By teaching *art as social justice* and not *art and social justice*, the unique collaborative nature of creativity is foregrounded and enables student-artists (and me) to work through complicated notions that other modes of knowledge cannot. The class itself becomes the space where a more socially just (art)world is manifest.

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### **About the Author**

Dylan A. T. Miner is a border-crossing artist, activist, historian, curator, and professor working throughout the Americas. In 2010, he was awarded a prestigious Artist Leadership Fellowship from the National Museum of the American Indian (Smithsonian, USA). In 2011, he hung solo exhibitions at Urban Shaman Gallery (Canada), University of Notre Dame (USA), Alma College (USA), Michigan Institute for Contemporary Art (USA), and Fort Lewis College (USA). As a member of the artists' collective Justseeds, he was awarded the Grand Prix at the 28th Biennial of Graphic Arts in Slovenia, and installed a solo Justseeds exhibition at the 29th Biennial. In 2012, he exhibited at *The Dreaming: Australia's International Indigenous Festival* and had solo exhibitions at Small Projects (Norway) and Galerie 101 (Canada). Miner holds a PhD in the history of art from The University of New Mexico and has published extensively and lectured globally on contemporary art, Indigenous visual sovereignty, and radical politics, including two forthcoming books from University of Arizona Press and Bloomsbury (publisher of Harry Potter). To date, he has published more than forty journal articles, book chapters, review essays, and encyclopedia entries. He is Assistant Professor in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at Michigan State University. His artwork, writing, and syllabi can be viewed at <http://www.dylanminer.com>.

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