

Faculty Retreat Submission
Barbara Yontz, Associate Professor Fine Art

Titles under consideration at this time— “The Radicality of a Social Art Practice”...or
“Artistic Practice as Radical Intervention”...or
“Art and Social Justice: In Defense of Lost Causes”

Art, Activism and Social Change”

In the 1960s artists began to realize how dramatically the market system had co-opted and controlled artistic production and distribution at the same time they witnessed the impact of social and political activism playing out on the streets.

While art has always already been social this reality is rarely acknowledged. More recently, particularly in the west, we view art through the lens of the past or the marketing of the present, and our lens is narrowly focused.

Beginning my art studies in the mid-970s, placed me in an intersection of two divergent ideas about arts production. On one hand, the dominant art style at the time was **Minimalism** with all the theory and masculinity that modernist practices had come to admire. On the other hand, a resistance to commodity-based art was on the rise witnessed by the work of the **Land artists** like Robert Smithson, and such, also, performance art, and works protesting the **Vietnam War**.

These practices operating outside the mainstream market were being acknowledged by a few arts critics in particular Lucy Lippard in books such as *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change* (1984), *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art*, 1976, (later she went on to write, “A Different War: Vietnam in Art (1990) *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (1990, 2000).

At the time, many artists noted the importance of resisting the commodification of art as a fundamental component to their practice. However, few, if any, recognized or mentioned Marxist ideas in relation to this work. The exception

was the Situationist International. Mostly Paris, France; with congresses also held in Munich, Germany; Venice, Italy. The Situationist International formed as an underground group out of a meeting of three small artistic groups (the Letterist International, Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeographical Association) in a bar in Cosio d'Arroscia, Italy, in 1957. It was there that Guy Debord (Society of the Spectacle) emerged as the dominant personality of the group, with the suggestion for the name.

While Marxist ideas had been instrumental to the development of Feminist Methods and Ideologies, and this was generally acknowledged, specific discussions of Marx in relation to the art work was avoided.

The 1980s witnessed a shift in America and in art to a more conservative and market-based focus on art. While there were many artists, in particular, female, African American, and Gay and Lesbian artists who were pushing back against mainstream, commodity-based tendencies in Contemporary Art, for the most part, they were marginalized and eventually silenced as funding for their political positions was cut.

At the same time the Guerrilla Girls were staging their guerrilla tactics to bring attention to the situation of Female and Artists of Color, the NEA was being forced to pull funding for art that did not support a popular political agenda, and at that time it was conservative and republican.

Little to no socially based arts practices are taught in art schools, they weren't when I was a student and in general are still not. We never learned about the radical political views of artists we studied or how art functioned to resist power at least since the Renaissance in the West. We didn't learn about the Situationist International, or even the Artworkers Coalition who actively used art to protest the war in Vietnam. As censorship can be accomplished in many ways, one that is extremely effective Lippard calls, 'cultural amnesia'. In this case artists are not

even talked about because events and artists forgotten by art world power structures could evoke something threatening to a high-cultural identity.

In her recent book, *Seven days in the Art World*, Sarah Thornton discusses the 'art world' as a place often characterized as a classless scene where artists from lower-middle class backgrounds drink champagne with high-prices hedge-fund managers, scholarly curators, and fashion designers. In reality this world is not at all egalitarian or democratic.... she says, 'Art is about excellence and exclusion.' If the art world shared one principle, it would probably be that nothing is more important than the art itself....the social world surrounding art is often distained as an irrelevant, dirty contaminant.

And even as the art world, along with everyone else, has embraced Postmodern ideas with regards to dissolution of hierarchies, in particular in art the inclusion of popular culture, the art work that is embraced by the mainstream is still quite an exclusive affair...and in addition a capitalist one.

Murakami. Roberta Smith writes: Who knew that the first Louis Vuitton boutique in Brooklyn would touch down smack in the middle of the borough's most venerable art institution? But there it is, at the Brooklyn Museum, bright and gleaming and blending smoothly into a sleek, stylish survey of the work of Takashi Murakami. Mr. Murakami, who is frequently called the Japanese Andy Warhol, is an astute manipulator of visual languages, artistic mediums and business models.

Which brings me to Marx...

In the past few years a number of contemporary philosophers and social theorists have returned to Marxist ideas. In "Living in the End of Times," Slavoj Zizek identifies world circumstances as evidence of the coming end of global capitalism. He maintains that Western societies are passing through necessary stages of grief, which then creates the chance for a "new beginning." This new

beginning for many contemporary philosophers contains a reexamination of capitalism as they imagine less individualistic, more social forms of exchange. Within this discourse, Marx factors heavily.

Discourse within art that critiques its commoditization is not new as it was the basis of the Dada experiment began during WWI in Zurich and continuing into the US after WWII with the ideas of Marcel Duchamp. Dada artists attempted to completely undo art as an aesthetic and/or 'retinal' object as they recognized art had been co-opted by the bourgeois society. Duchamp lived in New York until he died in the mid 1970s. Dada died years earlier and post WWII witnessed an explosion of artists and art galleries in NY. In 1960 in response to Jean Tinguely's, self destructing sculpture entitled, *Homage to New York 1960*, Marcel Duchamp quipped, "I'll tell you what's going to happen...the public will keep on buying more and more art, and husbands will start bringing little paintings to their wives on the way home from work, and we're going to drown in a sea of mediocrity. Maybe Tinguely and a few others sense this and are trying to destroy art before it's too late."

Years later (1979 *The Aesthetic Dimension*), philosopher and political theorist, Herbert Marcuse, said that within a capitalist system the deepest purposes of art go against the basic premises upon which capitalism is constructed. Within capitalism the only justifiable place for art is as an object that can be bought, speculated upon, and sold for a profit...or it might serve as diversion or entertainment. Its value as a tool that can regenerate the lost, hidden, creative, spiritual, and intuitive aspects of human life has been denigrated by capitalism. At its best art serves a different master than capitalism, one whose values are not so readily discerned.

While contemporary art is inextricably tied to the market, there are artists working outside it, exposing systems of power while creating social exchange.

I'm interested in identifying philosophic concepts that argue for disruption, tying them to artists whose work creates a 'new beginning' in contemporary art, one based less on individual and market concerns, and more on social ones. I have researched and presented papers on these artists and their work. In fact, the artists I most often reference, and who have influence my recent direction are, **Steve Kurtz (Critical Art Ensemble), Faith Wielding (SubRosa), Laurie Palmer (HaHa), Doug Ashford (Group Material), Mel Chin and Miwan Kwon (One Place After Another)**, all artists and collectives I was/ and am in direct contact with through Vermont College. While Krzysztof Wodiczko is an artists I don't know personally, he is another artist who provides models for art as a completely social event, one that allows individuals to interrogate the boundaries established between individuals and authority, while at the same time, participate in this possibility for change.

I am looking to situate a socially based art practice solidly within the context of mainstream art using Marxist critique of capitalism and the art market. My goal is to position artists working within communities for social change solidly within the mainstream of art history and critique.

At the same time, my own work, which has been dancing with these issues for some time, is changing from an object, installation or interactive practice to that of facilitator. I don't want to continue to see and support art as an elitist endeavor that situates itself in a narrowly defined framework of market driven contexts. My project is to participate in and discuss social arts practices as Arts Practices without marginalization.

So, in this paper for the Faculty Retreat, I would like to speak honestly about my own mixed contradictory feelings in drifting away from an artistic practice I have been engaged with for 20 years and into one that promises a marriage of what I have seen as my 'real' work, with my 'volunteer' work. At the same time, I hope to investigate the true function of the artist in these activist endeavors, as art for me continues to be a place where imagination and freedom thrives, providing a transgressive site for asking difficult questions without the desire to produce the answers.

Corrections Documentary Project

<http://www.correctionsproject.com/>

Ashley Hunt

Notes on the Emptying of a City...is a performance that acts as a dismantled film, where a narrator pieces together the sounds, images and storytelling of a documentary about Hurricane Katrina before a live audience. Exploring the first-person politics of being in New Orleans with a camera and microphone in the months following the storm, it recounts Hunt's engagement with community activists while researching the city's refusal to evacuate the Orleans Parish Prison, raising themes of architecture, cameras and visibility, and the powers of speech, silence, art and journalism in a moment of crisis. Set up as a slide lecture, a narrator sits at a desk before an audience, with papers and a laptop computer connected to a projector. Between meditations on his own experience he cues testimonies — videos of a citizen, a neighbor, an organizer and others — each one drawn from the archive of material compiled during his visits. The artist's narration, still images and videos weave together as a live montage that offers a larger testimony on disaster, race, law, speech and witnessing at a time when the urgency of Katrina's crisis seems to have receded into a comfortable past.

click here for project website: www.notesontheemptyingofacity.info

Community Arts network

<http://wayback.archive-it.org/2077/20100906194747/http://www.communityarts.net/>

About the Community Arts Network

The Community Arts Network (CAN) is a portal to the field of community arts, providing news, documentation, theoretical writing, communications, research and educational information. Headquartered at its Web site on the Internet, CAN

is a program of Art in the Public Interest (API), a nonprofit organization based in North Carolina. For a complete explanation of CAN's mission and activities, see the [Welcome](#) page.

A CAN History

Art in the Public Interest (API) is a nonprofit organization providing information and resources in support of art that is culturally engaged and serving communities. API's co-directors, Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland, founded and edited *High Performance* magazine for its entire 20 years, with an increasing focus on the field of community arts and art for social justice. In 1995 they sharpened their focus and mission by creating a new nonprofit organization, Art in the Public Interest, and, with Virginia Tech, founding the Community Arts Network in 19

Prison Creative Arts Project

<http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/pcap/>

The Prison Creative Arts Project's mission is to collaborate with incarcerated adults, incarcerated youth, urban youth and the formerly incarcerated to strengthen our community through creative expression. **Core Values** We believe that everyone has the capacity to create art. Art is necessary for individual and societal growth, connection and survival. It should be accessible to everyone. The values that guide our process are respect, collaboration in which vulnerability, risk, and improvisation lead to discovery and resilience, persistence, patience, love and laughter. We are joined with others in the struggle for social justice, and we make possible spaces in and from which the voices and visions of the incarcerated can be expressed. **PCAP is a student/faculty/community organization** based in the Department of English Language and Literature and generously supported by English and by the School of Art and Design at the University of Michigan. Members join primarily through taking Buzz Alexander's courses that train students to facilitate workshops in the arts in state prisons and juvenile facilities and Detroit high schools or Janie Paul's course that trains them to facilitate art workshops in juvenile facilities and prisons. Others join through a disciplined training program. We work with respect for institution rules and regulations and maintain close links with facility staff to whom we are responsible. Students in the courses and PCAP members meet on a weekly basis to share, discuss, and support each other's work. We also maintain close links with the facility staff to whom we are responsible. We maintain a spirit of friendliness, respect, and cooperation with corrections officers, recreation, athletic, religious, and special activities staff, and with assistant deputy wardens, deputy wardens, and wardens. Our work is open and positive, and we are responsive to any queries or requests for documentation a facility may ask of us. We are proud of our work and of our collaboration with each facility, and we do everything we can to enhance and improve that work and that collaboration

Artists United for Social Justice

<http://www.ausj.org/>

MISSION AUSJ is a 501c3 tax exempt charitable organization that empowers activists to create and distribute multimedia content that educates the public, particularly youth, about human rights violations and social injustices. **VISION AUSJ's** vision is to establish a global community of artists, activists and industry professionals who will create and distribute content that raises awareness and motivates action for social change.

Prison arts coalition

<http://thepisonartscoalition.wordpress.com/>

[Between the Bars Blog: A Space for Stories, Dialogue, and Opportunity](#)

Charlie DeTar, a PhD student at the [MIT Media Lab](#), fellow at the [MIT Center for Future Civic Media](#), and social justice activist, has been concerned about our criminal justice system for many years. He has watched the prison population skyrocket to over two million, and the gap between the number of African Americans and Caucasians behind bars grow exponentially. Knowing that one in three Black men will be incarcerated at some point in their lives, DeTar can't help but draw parallels between the prison system and slavery. "The Fourteenth Amendment only outlawed slavery for those not being punished for a crime," he says, "but what we have here is a dramatic accounting of the same practices of slavery that were going on 200 years ago."

DeTar also recognizes the significant challenges that men and women face when they return to their communities after being incarcerated. Finding housing and employment can be quite a challenge for those with criminal records, as can accessing public assistance of any form. With so few resources available to formerly incarcerated men and women, it's no wonder that the recidivism rate is over 50%.

Armed with this information, and passionate about providing a forum for the voices of incarcerated people, DeTar decided to create a blog where prisoners could post their stories. [Between the Bars](#) was initially launched as both a service and research project last October, and was met with an immediate influx of letters, stories, and poems from incarcerated writers. However, DeTar and his colleagues ran into some barriers to the research aspect of their project, and had to temporarily shut down the site. They re-launched in April, and already have been contacted by between 400 and 500 prisoners. Nearly 200 have sent in at least one post or profile.

When DeTar and his team of volunteers receive a post from someone in prison or jail, they scan it to the blog. Visitors to the site can assist in the transcription of

the post, and are encouraged to comment on the posts that speak to them. These comments are then sent back to the writers, creating an opportunity for dialogue. For those behind bars, this is a valuable opportunity to feel connected with the world outside the razor wire. By “giving people a platform where they can speak in own voice,” the blog enables writers to form “a personal identity outside the dynamic of prison.” This identity, as well as the social ties they have fostered through *Between the Bars*, can be carried with prisoners when they are released, helping them to feel more connected to their community and more prepared to face the challenges that await them on the outside.

For those visiting the blog from the comfort of home, *Between the Bars* provides an opportunity to learn about life inside our nation’s correctional institutions from the perspective of those most affected by them. DeTar hopes the site will help “break through the tendency people have of viewing people in prison as “untouchable class”, and inspire more compassion and activism. Prior to creating *Between the Bars*, DeTar spent a great deal of time reading work by incarcerated writers, and was “fascinated by their inside perspective. Even the most mundane stories,” he reflects, “drive home just how unproductive the whole experience of prison is...if people on the outside can see what life is like in prison, if they see prisoners as humans, as complex individuals with hopes and desires, they might start working against the sense that tells us to treat them as the fearful other.”

DeTar reports that *Between the Bars* now has a waiting list of almost 150 prisoners. Due to the tremendous success of the project, he and his colleagues (all of whom are volunteers) are exploring ways of more efficiently managing the site so that they won’t have to turn anyone away. In the meantime, they will continue to post letters and send every comment back to the writers. The most important thing supporters of the blog can do, says DeTar, is post comments – the writers long for the chance to connect with us.

[Denney Juvenile Justice Center Poetry Workshop Launches New Blog, Downloadable Poetry Books](#)

Denney Juvenile Justice Center Poetry Workshop founder and facilitator Mindy Hardwick writes,

In 2005, I volunteered to facilitate a poetry workshop with youth at Denney Juvenile Justice Center, located in Everett, Washington. Each week, I meet with a group of young men and a group of young ladies and we write poems which are based on the young people’s experience. As a part of the poetry workshop, we’ve published four books of the youth’s poetry. The poetry books are distributed, free of charge, to the youth themselves, as well as to others in the community. The youth always ask, “When is the next poetry book coming out? Is my poem in it?” The poetry workshop gives the teens an opportunity to express their stories and to be heard in their community. We are thrilled to have our [new blog](#) as a means for publishing the youth’s poetry, and hope the blog gives the teen writers another opportunity for their words to be heard.

Each Wednesday, one of the youth's poems is published on the blog, and Hardwick blogs about the writing process for that particular poem on her [personal blog](#). Here is the most recent excerpt from Hardwick's blog, which is a fantastic resource for facilitators:

In the Eyes Of...

We have a new post on the Denney Poetry Blog. The poem, "[In the Eyes of My Mother](#)," was first published in our second book of poetry, *I Am From*.

One of the poetry books I like to use with the teens in the detention center poetry workshop is, [You Hear Me: Poems and Writing by Teenage Boys](#), edited by Betsy Franco. The collection includes poems, stories, and essays from boys across the country. Sometimes there can be a misconception that boys don't talk about feelings, and what I've found working in the poetry workshop, is that boys can and do express their emotions. Very well!

In the collection, [You Hear Me](#), there is a poem which is entitled, *What I Am (In the Eyes of My Father)*. When I work with the teens at Denney, we read this poem, and then I ask them to think of someone important in their life. It could be a parent, teacher, best friend, girlfriend, or sibling. Or, it could be something larger such as a community, society, or world. I ask the question, who are you in the eyes of that person?

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Living in the End of Times