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At the intersection of education, art and activism: The case for Creative Chemistries

ABSTRACT

The work of many contemporary artists includes the use of dialogue and socially engaged practices. Interdisciplinary exchange, community building and participatory dialogue have been at the core of progressive education since the turn of the century. Inspired by the notion of the artist and the educator as creative 'border crossers,' this article describes a unique experiment in sharing creative practices in the arts and education that took place at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City in November 2015 by the non-profit organization Art21. Creative Chemistries was conceived as a means of placing artists, classroom teachers, students, principals, museum educators and community organizers, policy-makers in education, representatives from community-based arts organizations and university faculty all at the same table to talk and make work together exploring the intersections and disconnects between the values framing their labour and creative practices. This narrative proposes that forms of intentional interdisciplinary dialogue should be considered an activist gesture, and highlights the voices of Creative Chemistry participants to describe the new thinking, learning and creative practices generated between them.

KEYWORDS

contemporary art
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CROSSING BORDERS, ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE

As art moves away from gallery walls and museum pedestals to include activist modalities and socially engaged practices, artists are performing new roles in an expanded sphere of practice. In his essay, 'Borderline artists, cultural workers, and the crisis of democracy', Henry Giroux (1995) asserts a politicized context for the work of artists in the twenty-first century, describing artists as:

[c]ultural workers whose public function offers them the opportunity to serve as border intellectuals who engage in a productive dialogue across different sites of cultural production. Border intellectuals function in the space between 'high' and popular culture; between the institution and the street; between the public and the private [...] At stake here is not merely the opportunity to link art to practices that are transgressive and oppositional, but also to make visible a wider project of connecting forms of cultural production to the creation of multiple critical public spheres.

(Becker in Giroux 1995: 5)

Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández further describes the paradigm of the artist as border crosser as someone who 'challenges boundaries, rules, and expectations and disturbs the social order to promote social transformation and "reconstruction"' (2008: 244). Artists have performed these roles since art moved outside the rules and expectations of patronage and guilds. Border crossing remains an important conceptual and practical tool for artists invested in dismantling the boundaries that separate individuals from productive interchange and ideas from useful cross-pollination. Pursuing interdisciplinary enquiry, questioning national boundaries, up-ending established hierarchies between artist and audience, expert and novice, and establishing new forms of community and civic participation through forums for public discourse are just some of the forms of border crossing that artists have proposed through their work (Kellner 1995; Becker and Weins 1995; Gomez Peña 2000).

Embedded in many artist practices aligned with the idea of border crossing is the use of dialogue or facilitated discursive modes. In his essay, 'Conversation pieces: The role of dialogue in socially engaged art' (1999), later expanded into a book (2013), Grant Kester describes the growing interest in conversation as a mode of artistic practice and social activism, one that has the capacity to connect different participants, communities and realms of experience. Going beyond the initial expectations of simple conversation, Kester focuses on projects that are concerned with 'collaborative, and potentially emancipatory forms of dialogue and conversation'. In these projects, he describes specific examples where conversation is 'reframed as an active, generative process that can help us speak and imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse' (1999: 78).

As an educator working with teachers, the idea of border crossing in the form of interdisciplinary exchange, community building, and participatory dialogue has been at the core of progressive education since the turn of the century. John Dewey described the role of education in relation to democracy and civic participation in 1916 and advocated for experiential learning in the 1930s. Many teachers see art as a space for social action and transformation and are dedicated to creative and critical enquiry with youth through art-making that utilizes socially engaged artistic strategies. Educators provide some of the best models for border crossing among disciplines as well as the

obvious use of dialogue to enact the ideals of Kester's call to 'imagine beyond the limits of fixed identities and official discourse' (1999: 78). Meaningful teaching is invested in these ideals, and yet many teachers are neither entrusted nor expected to realize the creative freedom and licence of the artist in their approaches. What could be possible if teachers and artists shared practices to redefine the work of each space of practice? Can we position the classroom and the studio as relational sites for meaningful border crossing and productive dialogue that could re-imagine larger social expectations for art and education? What could artists, educators and policy-makers do collectively in a space to talk and learn together?

CREATIVE CHEMISTRIES

In November 2015, a unique experiment in sharing creative practices across disciplinary boundaries took place at the Park Avenue Armory in New York City, hosted by the non-profit organization Art21. Creative Chemistries was conceived as a means of placing artists, classroom teachers, students, principals, museum educators and community organizers, policy-makers in education, representatives from community-based arts organizations and university faculty all at the same table to talk together and make work together that would explore the intersections and disconnects between the values framing their labour and creative practices. Recognizing the lack of dialogue among these stakeholders, Creative Chemistries was premised on the notion that in order for a radical re-imagining of our fields of practice that could speak to the urgent issues and problems facing the country, local communities and individual students, there needed to be a means of talking, listening and working in a dedicated space that acknowledged difference but attempted to establish more meaningful connections.

At this time, Americans were confronting the final years of the presidency of Barack Obama, the first African American president who had run on a platform of hope. A waning sense of optimism and a related set of frustrations were settling in the minds of many Americans over unfulfilled promises, including criminal justice reform, immigration reform, and the seemingly endless US involvement in the conflicts in the Middle East. More acute was the swelling public acknowledgement of long-standing police brutality against black men in the United States. The Black Lives Matter movement was gaining visibility as the country continued to reel from the killing of Michael Brown by white police officers in Ferguson, Missouri, the year before and the shooting of black parishioners in a church in Charlestown, South Carolina, in July 2015. Closer to home, the killings of Eric Garner and Akai Gurley in New York City by police also framed the urgent need for conversations around policy change, artistic activism and educational reform.

Designed as a platform for timely, critical dialogue involving artists and an expanded web of creative practitioners and educators, Creative Chemistries orchestrated interactions among participants working across diverse cultural sectors and community-based contexts using three different modes of engagement: Exchanges, Dialogues and Experiments. Each format involved invited contributors and voluntary participants in cross-disciplinary dialogue in different ways, with the goal of up-ending traditional ideas about experts and learners, the hierarchies of disciplines and fields of knowledge, and expected modes of knowing, teaching and learning. In each forum, ideas around how participants could both align their practices as well as hold each other accountable to different levels of agency and power were raised.

Discussions repeatedly returned to themes of unlearning and critical thinking, bias and privilege, and the need for generative language and cross-disciplinary exchange. Artists confronted the roles and responsibilities of policy-makers; community-based practices were dissected from diverse vantage points; and educators and artists attempted to engage in real collaboration during the interactions that unfolded throughout the day.

In the Exchanges an artist and a policy-maker were intentionally paired to draw out the distinct modes of advocacy and cultural work enacted by each. More importantly, the Exchanges placed individuals at the same table who often advocate for and work within similar fields but rarely confront each other's work. Without a pre-scripted set of questions or a moderator shaping the expectations for the conversation, the open-ended format opened the floor to the participants to find places of commonality and tension. In the resulting discussion, similarities in personal and organizational missions and motivations were often offset by differences in how the participants described their aspirations and the strategic approaches leveraged to accomplish that work. Speakers identified different tools and vocabularies as well as capacities and working models within which their work was framed, often revealing frictions between working within government or policy systems and working outside or alongside those systems.

In one Exchange, John Abodeely from The President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities and the artist LaToya Ruby Frazier addressed the issue of expanding access and equity to education and the arts. Both Frazier and Abodeely described the contexts in which they work as advocates and change-makers, and then challenged each other to consider the responsibilities of their respective roles in light of blatant disparities for communities of colour in terms of class, environmental health, and access to the arts in education. Frazier introduced her work documenting the city of Braddock, Pennsylvania, where industrial blight and environmental racism has wreaked havoc on local residents. She says,

[w]e spend so much time talking from the top down to people, and in reality I think those that have been marginalized and those that took the heaviest hit since the collapse of the industry, have the most education to give. So perhaps instead of a panel of the experts and the educators and the policy-makers, instead of them being at the panels, perhaps it should be the people that we never hear from, we never see in the media, the ones that are never getting access to the resources – perhaps they should be on the panel and we should be listening to them.

(Frazier n.d., par. 6)

Later in the conversation, Abodeely countered,

I worry that from my vantage point, which is as part of an agency that's fairly high up on the arts ladder in the federal – in the presidential administration – how much we can actually effect [...] I worry that we're approaching it from a perspective of what the administration can do and we'll never be revolutionary enough or innovative enough. We'll always have to fit within the administration. No matter how revolutionary we get, it has to stay palatable in the context we work in. And it worries me that in the artistic or cultural sphere, you're invited to be more revolutionary but then you end up having less influence.

(n.d., par. 16)

The limitations of the state, and of policy itself as a forum for radical ideas or re-invention, was confronted by the short reach of the individual without a larger forum to amplify and disseminate their voice. A unified sense of purpose was challenged by a recognition of unequal shares of agency and spheres of influence. The exchange raised the following question: what more could be accomplished with a conjoined sense of purpose and means across policy and artistic production?

The next forum for discussion was the Dialogues. These conversations addressed four topics and were designed as spaces for a moderator and discussants from a wider range of contexts to share experiences and develop new questions around art and education. Audience members were integrated into the conversation after the four invited contributors initiated the conversation. Topics included: Twenty-First Century Citizens, Classroom as Community/Community as Classroom, Intersections of Artistic and Educational Practices, and Towards Equity, Access and Social Justice. Across the eight different Dialogues the notion of unlearning was raised repeatedly to describe the ways that education has traditionally referred to the dissemination and accumulation of pre-determined knowledge rather than the cultivation of skills to deconstruct and even rethink and refute established knowledge or modes of thinking. From many of the contributors, the idea of unlearning was described in relation to capacities for critical thinking about – and questioning of – dominant social narratives and values conveyed through teaching methods, textbooks, the media, and visual culture. Zipporah Mills, an elementary school principal, describes,

I was just thinking about the difference between how we were taught. We talked about the difference of being a facilitator and this traditional way where someone stood in front of the classroom and they gave you knowledge, and that was it, right? So we need to un-think that [...] When you teach children to construct meaning, part of that has to be that you teach children to be critical thinkers. You teach children to ask questions.

(n.d., par. 22)

Later in another conversation, the artist Luis Camnitzer shared, 'I don't care that much about the formal art training that happens in art schools. I care more about the integration of art thinking to break down disciplines, to break down dogmas' (n.d., par. 17). He goes on to say,

the function of a good education program [...] would be [to ask], OK how do we create as many heretics as possible, so that the canon can be shifted, can be adapted, and can be owned by the people that should own it, and not by the social class that finances through sporadic philanthropy and censorship?

(n.d., par. 31)

Unlearning speaks to the contrary roles that artists and educators are often seen as enacting. Educators have traditionally been expected to present knowledge to students, enacting what Paolo Freire describes as the 'banking model' of education that deposits pre-determined information and values into the supposed empty vessel of the student (Freire: 1967). Conversely, artists are often described (or describe themselves) as revealing hidden narratives or contradicting dominant or normative claims through their work and

working methods. As the artist and Creative Chemistries participant Mark Dion describes,

[m]y idea of art isn't necessarily something that provides answers or is decorative or affirmative. I enjoy things toward the dark side that tend to have a more critical function. That's what I see as the job of contemporary artists: to function as critical foils to dominant culture. My job as an artist isn't to satisfy the public. That's not what I do. I don't necessarily make people happy. I think the job of the artist is to go against the grain of dominant culture, to challenge perception, prejudice, and convention [...] I think it's really important that artists have an agitational function in culture.

(n.d., par. 11)

Creative Chemistries began to unpack larger social expectations for teachers and artists, articulating the ways that each role has the capacity to push back against dominant or outmoded values and highlighting new modes of practice for the work of unlearning across contexts.

In other conversations the theme of unlearning was explored in relation to recognizing and articulating individual and organizational bias and privilege. In a Dialogue focused on Equity, Access and Social Justice, the artist Mark Bradford asserted,

[w]e have to be very aware of our biases when we start teaching. We can talk about social justice and ideas outside of the norm, but often-times, you're dealing with students who have traditional viewpoints – especially teenagers – about gender, race, and sexuality. If you're not careful, if you just demand that they have this postmodern social justice perspective, I think it can be very dangerous. It can be very alienating.

(n.d., par. 5)

Following up, Raygine DiAquoi, an educational equity consultant, shared,

[o]ne of the things I do as a researcher is I make my bias very clear, and I explain to the participants how that [bias] influences the way that I approach a project and see a project. And then I have them think about what kind of proclivities they bring to a particular project. I'm all for putting the biases on the table.

(n.d., par. 6)

In the second iteration of the Access, Equity & Social Justice Dialogue, former English teacher and writer, Fadwa Abbas, contributed,

[t]he longer I live in this country, the further away I am from my little house in Sudan and my experience there, the more important it is to understand that there's this vast abyss of darkness in terms of our understanding of what people's lives are like elsewhere. And in that darkness we assume that their lot is worse than ours. There is a narrative of benevolence, that we have something to teach them. They don't have something to teach us. When we say education, that's not just education of 'them.' It's also educating ourselves in terms of all of these ways of being and existing.

(n.d., par. 27)

In the spaces of art production, research and education, acknowledging and working within an understanding of bias infers different possible practices. And yet implicit in any context is the same obligation and responsibility to continually examine position and privilege in relation to others – a civic duty that must touch everyone regardless of their role in and relationship with producing, teaching and advocating for art and education.

The final element of Creative Chemistries included a series of Experiments led by pairs of artists and educators that actively engaged participants in aspects of the creative process. Focusing on strategies for thinking, making and performing through art and education, these experiential and participatory workshops encouraged collaboration, experimentation and interdisciplinary exploration. The experiments ranged from materials-based exploration using tinfoil and string to participating in a ritualized burial performance exploring consumption and waste. In other Experiments participants created Snapchat movies responding to the prompt 'Does contemporary art matter?', and played visual card games to develop stories and relationships among images from different disciplines. In each case the artists and educators facilitating the session had to find common ground in relation to their respective working methods and collaborated to design an accessible experience to engage other artists and educators in their processes.

In one experiment, *The Language Gap*, artist Paul Pfeiffer and high-school art teacher Nick Kozak began their collaboration via an international Skype call between the Philippines where Paul was installing an exhibition and Nick's classroom in midtown Manhattan.

The Language Gap was born out of a very literal 'gap' between myself and Paul Pfeiffer. Through a series of discussions that occurred digitally from opposite sides of the planet, the two of us found a common interest in how communication skills are formed.

(Kozak n.d., par. 4)

After a series of conversations seeking common ground, the idea of language and modes of communication across different social contexts and hierarchies became the means of connecting Pfeiffer's interest in the tradition of speech choir in the Philippines and Kozak's focus on pedagogy and language in his teaching. Their workshop involved a group of twenty teenagers who focused on four areas where most language miscommunications arise: Social Hierarchies, Social Norms, Accents/Dialects and Cultural Diffusion. Participants were divided into four groups, with students facilitating discussion around each of the four topics in multiple rounds. 'I encounter communication issues every day in my teaching practice at a local NYC high school. This is where social norms get "poured into concrete," and the world becomes much more finite' (Kozak n.d., par. 5).

As the facilitators, students were put into the role of expert, while the participating adults – including teachers, academics, policy-makers, etc. – became the subjects and learners.

I was able to relate to my topic on social hierarchies in language mostly because I'm a teenager. When talking to my teachers, I address them as Mr. and Ms. and do not use their first names as a sign of respect. However, they do refer to me by my first name, which establishes my role as a subordinate.

(Prince in Kozak n.d., par. 11)

This workshop not only put adults in the position of learner or respondent but opened up a space for examining the rationales and biases we use when we are in dialogue with others across different contexts, social expectations, and positions of power. Student facilitators did not use a script or pre-determined questions but worked before the event to collectively generate strategies for discussing social norms and how mentalities and behaviour change as people grow older. Discussions focused on how and why we shape the language we use and the implications for the social structures we work within and conform to as adults, as learners, as professionals. Participants were prompted to reflect on differences in professional and personal language and in relation to diverse global contexts, as well as how we alter and adapt spoken and body language to suit specific needs or social expectations in order to adapt and fit in.

After the workshop, the students observed that the adults seemed to speak with very specific and predetermined agendas and intentions – ‘as if they are out to prove something’. Another student commented,

[m]any of the adults still came up to us and told us that we facilitated conversation very well, and that ‘they were surprised.’ Of course sometimes they can’t control it because they’re so used to hierarchies based on age, but it did feel a little demeaning, because it seemed to imply that because of our age we don’t have the capability of creating an educated discussion.

(Prince in Kozak n.d., par. 13)

Investigating the gap between linguistic and social hierarchies demonstrated the division between student leaders and adult participants, both attempting to be heard and understood but still remaining separated by their perceived roles and positions of power.

There’s a lot of hot noise about social justice these days, and how to infuse one’s practice with it. But in the end, I would say real justice is simply providing opportunities for marginalized people to have a voice when it comes to political discourse – to share the mic when sharing perspectives. This happens when I help find my students employment, when they get internships at museums, and when they’re allotted a chance to talk to adults on level ground. For me personally, the result of putting a group of multicultural teens in charge of a room of multicultural adults couldn’t be closer to the core of what I had hoped to achieve: to unite people by defining what commonly divides them.

(Kozak n.d., par. 9)

AN ACTIVIST GESTURE?

Can gathering people who never have the chance to sit at the same table to talk and engage across their fields of practice be considered an activist gesture? Creative Chemistries did not solve a specific problem that day, nor did it re-write policy or future politics, but there was a profound sense of solidarity and connection across what are often conceived of as wide chasms between practices, contexts and fundamental levels of power. The policy-makers described the limitations of bureaucracy, teachers brought their creative practices into dialogue with artistic practices, and students assumed the

authority and expertise to engage adults in conversation around their own blind spots and biases. Most significant was the culture of listening that was enacted as individuals stepped out of their disciplinary silos and rubbed up against other ways of describing, labouring, participating, leading and producing.

The disciplines and practices of art, education and activism each engage in forms of teaching, learning and creative and critical engagement in public structures and democratic systems. Correspondingly, we must re-imagine traditional roles for artists, teachers and activists and their capacities to work in dialogue and across practices in support of civic participation.

Education cannot be reduced to the discourse of schooling. Pedagogical relationships exist wherever knowledge is produced, highlighting how conflicts over meaning, language, representation become symptomatic of a larger struggle over cultural authority, the role of intellectuals and artists, and the meaning of democratic public life.

(Giroux 1995: 8)

The ability to cross-pollinate language, methods and values that define our work is more necessary than ever. Generating authentic understandings but also aligning and amplifying our work through others to generate expanded systems, networks and positions of power and agency are crucial strategies for enacting resistance through educational and artistic activism. We need diverse networks of people to define new models for learning, for teaching, for creating. Tables must be up-ended, and new experts must be recognized and elevated in the arenas where decisions are made and ideas shared. Creative Chemistries proposed that the capacity to generate new language, to rethink and unlearn what is outmoded, and to reposition ourselves in relation to others is perhaps not radical, but is urgent for fostering new generations of critical, creative, active citizens and future border crossers.

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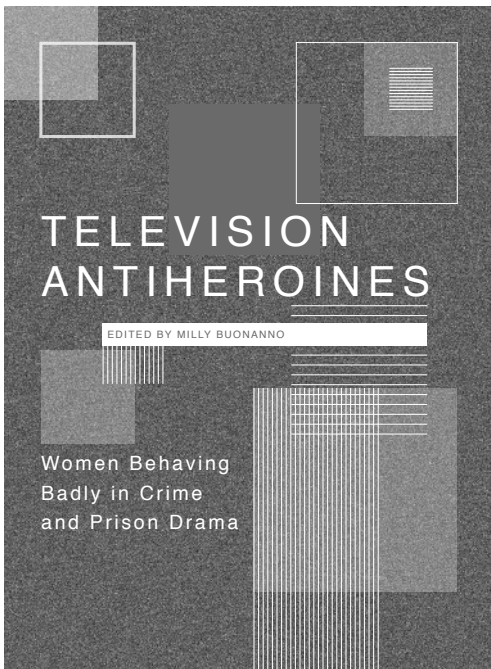
Jessica Hamlin is an assistant visiting clinical professor in the Art Education program at New York University. She is an educator interested in contemporary art as a site for critical discourse and the potential of artistic practices to inform new pedagogical possibilities in K-12 classrooms. Her teaching interests include: contemporary art and artistic activism, critical pedagogy, and the intersections of art and educational theory. Prior to joining NYU, Jessica served as the Director of Educational Initiatives for ART21, founding the ART21 Educators learning community and launching Creative Chemistries – a platform for timely trans-disciplinary exchange between artists and educators. Additional experience in a range of cultural organizations, schools, and in city government has included facilitating the education programs at the non-profit gallery Art In General, directing the community-based Saturday Art School at Pratt Institute, managing a comprehensive planning and assessment process for the Boston Mayor's Office of Cultural Affairs examining school and community-based arts

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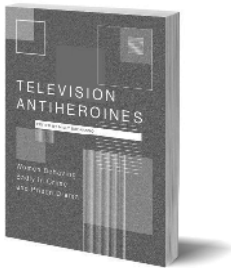
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Television Antiheroines

Women Behaving Badly In Crime and Prison Drama

Edited by Milly Buonanno



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As television has finally started to create more leading roles for women, the female antiheroine has emerged as a compelling and dynamic character type. *Television Antiheroines* looks closely at this recent development, exploring the emergence of women characters in roles typically reserved for men, particularly in the male-dominated genre of the crime and prison drama.

The essays collected in *Television Antiheroines* are divided into four sections or types of characters: mafia women, drug dealers and aberrant mothers, women in prison and villainesses. Looking specifically at shows such as *Gomorrah*, *Mafiosa*, *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Orange is the New Black* and *Antimafia Squad*, the contributors explore the role of race and sexuality and focus on how many of the characters transgress traditional ideas about femininity and female identity. They examine the ways in which bad women are portrayed and how these characters undermine gender expectations and reveal the current challenges by women to social and economic norms.



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