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CRITICAL ART EDUCATION: THE ART OF SOCIAL (EX)CHANGE

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Regimes of the (In)visible

It was a Saturday morning and Tara had just arrived at the Pearson VUE Center to write the New York State Teacher Certification Examination (NYSTCE). As she stood in line to register for the test, she noticed that others in front of her were being asked to provide thumb prints as part of an identification verification process. Surprised by this procedure, Tara questioned the staff at the registration desk about the policy. What would happen to her thumb print after the exam? Would Pearson VUE or the State of New York retain ownership of her data? Where would it be stored? For how long? Who would have access to it? Would it eventually be destroyed?

The staff members were not equipped to answer these questions though they did inform Tara of the NYSTCE policy that states: “If you do not allow your thumb print to be taken, you may be denied admission to the test or your score may be voided without refund or credit.”^{vi} While she clearly felt uneasy about this identification verification procedure, she also wondered if she was

being overly paranoid. More importantly, she did not want to jeopardize her future career as an art teacher by standing up for an abstract privacy issue. Reluctantly, Tara thus provided a thumb print and wrote the test.

The following week while she was attending classes at NYU, Tara began contemplating possible research topics for her Final Project class in Art Education and again returned to the thumb print experience and the questions it raised. She began some preliminary online research around the topics of privacy and biometric data (including finger printing). Intrigued by what she found, she continued to dig further. Her search eventually led her to discover a burgeoning security and surveillance industry – one that is attempting to use technology to strike a balance between security and privacy. This became her chosen topic of study for the term.

When Tara's classmate Sarah first moved from a small town to New York City to attend graduate school, she was appalled by the frequency of sexual harassment perpetrated by men in public spaces. From the moment she stepped out her front door, she was regularly a target of vile remarks and rude, often aggressive, gestures and behavior. Sarah began to investigate the legal frameworks in place to deal with such behavior. She soon discovered that while there are laws prohibiting sexual harassment in the workplace, the police rarely take any action when women complain about sexual harassment in public spaces. Thus, when it came time to select a research topic for her Final Project, she knew immediately that this would be her topic of study for the semester. Along with a strong desire to learn more about this issue, she also wanted to use her research to open a critical dialogue about sexual harassment in public.

Both Sarah and Tara went on to develop public art projects inspired by their research that challenge the complex ways we are positioned by instruments of vision (Haraway, 1991). Their work, outlined in more detail below, serves as an important entry point for an examination of critical art and pedagogical practices. We believe the artworks produced by our students can create alternative “subjectivities, discourses, institutions, and built environments” (Haghighian, n.d.) that actively disrupt the ways we have been schooled to act and see. This in turn may open spaces for art education to become integral to changing hierarchal social formations. In what follows, we share some preliminary thoughts on critical art and educational practices. To begin this discussion, we outline our pedagogical approach at New York University as a framing device and then provide a description and analysis of two public art projects that were produced as part of our Art Education MA degree program requirements. Our hope is to use this work to tease out some of the issues that surround critical art and educational practices within the context of a graduate level teacher education program.

Critical Art Education at NYU: The Final Project

The NYU Art Education MA program is committed to the democratization of society through art education and schooling. It combines critical theory with a solid grounding in socially engaged artistic and pedagogical practices. The curriculum is rooted in a democratic ethos that emphasizes contemporary art and its social context. The program thus conceptualizes the artist-teacher as cultural producer, intellectual, and activist and aims to train critical art educators who are committed to revealing, and resisting hidden forms of power. It emphasizes the critical, artistic, and pedagogic task of combining the history of modernist aesthetics with the broader cultural theories, practices, and critiques presented by post-structuralist discourse. In this way,

the program advances a model of conceptualism in art and art education that acknowledges the legacy of modernist production but which is highly critical of modernism's many blind spots.

Along with an intensive series of courses and field experiences, students are also required to conduct a sustained research and studio project during their final semester. Called the Final Project, this culminating experience is designed to provide students with an opportunity to reflect upon and extend their learning in the program by challenging and broadening their understanding of what it means to be a contemporary artist and critical art educator. The Final Project experience is intended to model ways that contemporary artistic practices can be informed and enhanced through research. This approach places art at the center of students' investigations and thus demonstrates how art can become a form of research that shapes knowledge about our world. The Final Project experience presents students with the opportunity to identify an issue or question that has particular significance to their art making and/or pedagogical practice and to carefully investigate it using art as the primary vehicle through which they present their findings. Over the course of a semester, students conduct research and produce an artistic project or a body of art work. Students also write a critical research paper and create a thesis artifact (book, website, DVD, etc) which serves as a historical record of the research project. The Final Project culminates in a group exhibition in a gallery on campus. During the opening reception for the exhibition, students each give a brief research talk and present their project through the lens of their artistic work.

The Final Project is supported by a research class where students explore theoretical, social, political, ethical, and practical aspects of research within the contexts of contemporary art

making and teaching. Throughout the course, a special emphasis is placed on examining contemporary artists who use research as a key aspect of their artistic practices. Students are introduced to contemporary artists like Trevor Paglen, Peggy Diggs, Sheila de Bretteville, Jeremy Deller, Alfredo Jaar, Krysztof Wodiczko and others who utilize ethnography and other methodological approaches as an integral component of their artistic work. They also examine artists like Guillermo Gomez-Peña, Coco Fusco, Nikki S. Lee and Sophie Calle whose work raises pressing and complicated ethical issues in relationship to contemporary research and cultural practices. Students also study contemporary art theorists including Miwon Kwon, Claire Doherty, Hal Foster, Nicolas Bourriaud, and Jacques Rancier and examine scholarly debates surrounding definitions of “legitimate” knowledge and research and are introduced to issues of representation, subjectivity, and colonialism within the milieu of research practices in the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Scopic Impositions: The Invisibility Suit

In the following sections, we describe two Final Project research projects undertaken by students enrolled in the MA in Art Education program at NYU. While these two examples don't fully represent the diversity of student research projects carried out in our program, they do serve as valuable case studies for examining some of pedagogical and philosophical foundations of the NYU program.

As Tara began working on her Final Project research, she immersed herself in the writings of Foucault, Orwell, Baudrillard, and others. She also sought out and discovered a number of contemporary artists, including Jill Magid, who engage with issues of surveillance, privacy, and

control. Starting in 2003, Magid approached the Amsterdam Police Department in the Netherlands and convinced them to allow her to decorate some of their public surveillance cameras with rhinestones. Magid's project, titled System Azure ii, was designed to draw attention to the surveillance cameras as “props in the theater of public space” (Zacks, 2003). Magid is critical of the “public safety” rhetoric surrounding surveillance cameras and describes them instead as “visual Band-Aids that emptily represent safety” (Zacks, 2003). She uses rhinestones and other costume jewelery to parody the surveillance cameras as cheap, showy emblems of power.

Tara's research also introduced her to the work of Hasan Elahi, whose Tracking Transienceⁱⁱ documents the artist's every movement. Elahi developed Tracking Transience after being detained by the FBI in 2002 as a terrorism suspect. He was later released after taking and passing lie-detector tests but the experience convinced him of the need to maintain an alibi at all times. To document his entire life, he created a website that syncs up with a personal GPS device and tracks his exact location at all times. Elahi also regularly uploads all of his credit card receipts to the site and has published over 20,000 photos taken during his daily activities.

Tara also discovered Ken Goldberg's Respectful Camerasⁱⁱⁱ, a project inspired by the work of John Baldessari in which Goldberg directly addresses the issue of personal privacy and surveillance cameras. Through the Respectful Cameras system, people who wish to remain anonymous wear bright colored markers like hats or clothing which are identified and tracked by the system. The software then obscures peoples' identities by overlaying opaque bubbles over their faces. Google later implemented a similar approach to privacy through their face-blurring

technology, which attempts to obscure the identities of pedestrians captured in its Street View Google Maps images. Google originally developed this technology in response to growing privacy concerns about the search giant's "all-seeing digital camera eye" (Shankland, 2008).

Tara's research also introduced her to other companies that are attempting to use technology to supposedly enhance security while preserving privacy. Eptascape's Privacy Protection Mask^{iv}, for instance, is a surveillance camera system that performs real-time video analysis to mask people's identities. In basic terms, the system scans a subject's face with facial recognition software and also analyzes how he or she walks. The system then analyzes this data to determine if the subject under surveillance is a known or possible threat. After determining that the subject is not a "threat," the system "pixelates" their image, thereby transforming the human form into a series of tiny white boxes. The resulting images look strangely similar to a walking Yeti or Abominal Snowman. While the Privacy Protection Mask effectively obscures the identities of those under surveillance, the system also allows operators to retroactively remove the pixels from subjects should they later need to be viewed and identified.

Fascinated with the Eptascape technology, Tara set out to translate and re-purpose it through the lens of her own artistic practice. Using mesh fabric and 1000 blank PVC identity cards (similar to the cards used to produce drivers licenses), Tara created a suit designed to mask her physical identity. The finished piece, entitled "Invisibility Suit," bears a strong physical resemblance to the pixelated Abominal Snowman figures produced by Eptascape's Privacy Protection Mask. The suit thus enabled Tara to symbolically enact her own user-generated version of the Privacy

Protection Mask. The one key difference, however, was that the Invisibility Suit shifted the power back to the subject of surveillance. As Tara explains:

The invisibility suit is a physical manifestation of this technology and ways in which our bodies can be measured as data. Increasingly, biometrical developments encroaching upon the public sphere are at the focus of vast ethical debates. It also allows us to regain control of scopie impositions, in a sense this suit allows the wearer to assert his or her power of keeping his/her bodily representation objective. It rejects the viewer's power to judge, interpret, and apply any values to the person being filmed. The proverbial playing field is leveled and the wearer has sent a semaphoric message to the video viewers: "How can I trust you if you don't trust me?" (Citizen Finneran, 2008).

Over the course of a few weeks, Tara used her invisibility suit to interact with surveillance cameras in a number of public settings in New York City. These performances attracted considerable attention from passerbys and served as a conduit for a number of compelling conversations about privacy, surveillance, power, technology, and control. Tara also posted documentation of her project online which spawned further conversations about these issues and her artistic response to them.

The Gauntlet: Or "Hot Pussy" is No Way to Say Hello

Sarah's research into sexual harassment introduced her to the concepts of the male and female gaze (Mulvey, 1989; Berger, 1972 ; Pollock, 2006). This eventually led her to an analysis of our visual culture as one of the primary mechanisms that perpetuates the male gaze. She also studied the work of contemporary artists who address the male and female including the artistic

interventions of the Guerrilla Girls. Sarah also explored the notion of the female gaze through an exhibit at Cheim and Read Gallery entitled “The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women.” Theoretically grounded by Laura Mulvey’s (1975) seminal, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” this exhibit featured work by Cindy Sherman, Diane Arbus, and others. Their work provided important insights into how women see themselves and other women and also demonstrated how concepts like male spectatorship and female objectification can be challenged and inverted.

Sarah’s research also introduced her to a photographic project by Stephanie Diamond titled “These Are The Men Who Hit On Me On The Street” which became foundational to her Final Project work. Between the years 2001 and 2004, Diamond photographed each man propositioned and/or sexually harassed her out in public. Diamond created a catalogue of over 300 such images that were later exhibited in galleries around the world. In speaking about the project, Diamond (n.d.) explained:

[T]hrough this project I achieve an equal exchange between myself and the men who hit on me. Once the man has hit on me, my only reaction is to raise my camera and shoot. I do not utter a word, or display a physical reaction. The titles of the photographs are the exact words the men use to hit on me.

Diamond’s project inspired Sarah to devise a way that she could reveal how sexual harassment reproduces patriarchal relations while also inverting this relationship by exposing these men to public scrutiny. As Sarah explains, her objective was to bring to light the issue of sexual harassment and to change the public focus of our attention from the victim to the perpetrator:

Most of the research, discourse, media, and news coverage around sexual harassment discusses it through an individual framework focusing on the victim. The solution that that framework leads to is the victim helping herself. There is very little to do with the male. It is not my problem or my responsibility to prevent men from assaulting me. It is a man's problem and a man's responsibility. It was therefore the goal of my project to change a "woman's problem" into a public prerogative. (cited in Kittappa, 2010)

Sarah developed an artistic intervention entitled *The Gauntlet* that included seven life-size cardboard silhouettes of men, representing different demographics, which were placed outside the main entrance to the Union Square subway station in New York City. Each silhouette had a different sign on its chest with slogans such as: "I grope women on trains," "I expose myself to women almost everyday," "I objectify women," "I masturbate on women in trains," "I say crude comments to women on the L Train," and "I make catcalls to women in the street." The installation also included an audio projection of a male voice uttering vulgar phrases.

Sarah's intervention lasted five hours and during that time her team engaged in conversations about sexual harassment with over 200 passerbys and handed out 12,000 postcards. The front of each postcard included the phrase: "Hot pussy is no way to say hello" while the reverse side showed two men exposing themselves in public and a woman in the center taking a photograph of them with her mobile phone. The accompanying text encouraged women to take photographs of perpetrators, upload the images to a website called *Hollaback NYC*^v, and to also file a police report.

Critical Art and Educational Practices

One of the tensions inherent in critical art practices such as the ones we've described above is the interplay between the art and its social function. This is clearly evident in work like Tara's and Sarah's which is intentionally situated outside of the formal art establishment and within the public realm. Such public and performative work disrupts traditional notions of object-based artworks and brings into question how we might understand and evaluate it. Some have argued these types of artistic practices require new artistic models of interpretation and assessment. Bourriaud (1998), for instance, contends that socially-engaged artistic practices cannot be separated from their larger social contexts. He proposes a "relational aesthetics" and claims such artworks should be judged based upon the inter-human relations they represent, produce or prompt. Kester (2004) argues this type of public work places a special emphasis on process over product and suggests that its value can be found within a "dialogical aesthetics." He claims that artworks situated within the public sphere should be assessed based on their ability to stimulate empathic conversations between artist and viewer. Claire Bishop (2006) is more cautious about what she describes as the "social turn" in contemporary art. She contends that socially-engaged artworks can open important spaces for non-object-based practices but also warns that such works should not sacrifice aesthetics on the alter of social change.

Within the NYU Art Education program where critical theory and contemporary visual art practices are both deeply embedded in the curriculum, we recognize the art object, performance, or installation as a form of representation that is intimately connected to larger aesthetic^{vi} and

socio-political concerns. We require our students to critically consider the ways a given social context or situation is conditioned by aesthetic exchange and viewer interaction.

Throughout our coursework, including the Final Project experience, we ask our students to examine and challenge the distinctions between social exchange, cultural critique, and aesthetic experience. And we provoke them to produce socially-engaged artworks that critically engage viewers both intellectually and aesthetically. This provocation is not without difficulties. As Dubleton (n.d.) explains, one of the primary challenges of critical art practice is “creating room for the animation of both the artwork itself and the larger discourse” (p. 5).

We believe that Tara’s Invisibility Suit and Sarah’s Gauntlet intervention serve as successful examples of critical art and educational practices. Both projects can be understood as operating within a public pedagogy framework - one that invites public participation and which opens social spaces for engaged conversations, communal learning, and social critique. And both works accomplish this by harnessing the visual and symbolic power of contemporary artistic practices. While each piece complicates traditional conceptions of object-driven artwork, neither one rejects it outright. Instead these artists adopt a hybrid artistic approach that utilizes symbolic objects and actions to establish social situations - ones where the exchanges between artists and viewers become fundamental components of the artworks themselves.

But while we are strong advocates of critical art and art educational practices, we also understand that these approaches include real risks. We recognize, for instance, the inherent contraction of working critically within the institutional structures of the art world and the academy. As Abigail

Solomon-Godeau (1990) suggests, it can be problematic to critique from within the very system one seeks to challenge. She contends that “once the decision is made to operate within the institutional space of art rather than outside it, critical writing and critical art are alike caught up in and subject to the very conditions such work attempts to contest” (p.x). Part of the challenge then as critical artists and art educators is to learn how to move back and forth within the institution from the margins to the center. As Solomon-Godeau suggests, “working with contradictions entails not only a strategy of position as such but a degree of maneuverability as well” (p.x).

And we also acknowledge that working critically in the way we’ve described can too easily move into the arena of agitprop where spaces for conversation become arenas for contestation and debate. Such work, whether pedagogical or artistic, can quickly become didactic, overrun with an ideological dogmatism that shuts down discussion and eliminates the generative spaces for learning and collaboration. Thus developing a critical art educational pedagogy necessitates not only focusing on the creation of art objects, but also conceiving of art as a form of authentic social-engagement, as a situation and a place where generative discussions and collaborations can happen.

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i See New York State Office of Teaching Initiatives FAQ:

<http://ohe33.nysed.gov/tcert//faqtests.html#fingerprints>

ii <http://www.trackingtransience.com/>

iii See Current TV's video introduction to the Respectful Cameras project

http://current.com/art/89565629_respectful-cameras.htm

iv <http://www.eptascape.com/products/PrivacyMall/PrivacyMall.html>

v Hollaback NYC is a non-profit activist group founded by Emily May to fight sexual harassment in the streets of NYC <http://www.ihollaback.org/>

vi Our use of the term "aesthetics" is inspired by Ranciere's (2004) "aesthetic regime of art" in which he reclaims aesthetics from the narrow confines imposed by modernism and re-links it to politics and the political domain.