Expanding *the* Center:

Looking to The Center for Urban Pedagogy for a successful model of participatory pedagogy

by

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Education as [Social Practice] Art

This summer, I was asked to participate in a collaborative essay project in conjunction with the exhibition *Condensations of the Social*, curated by Sara Reisman at the Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn. The goal of the essay was to collectively hash out the term "social practice" as both a genre and a medium in contemporary art, hitching its use for the most part to the recent increase in expanded practices such as public and community-based art, curatorial practice, pedagogy as art, and so forth. Included in the project were Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Tim Rollins and K.O.S, Harrell Fletcher and Jen Delos Reyes with their MFA students, among others. The resulting document proved just how difficult it is to pin down what, exactly, even practitioners within this field make of the phenomenon. The text reads like an assemblage of scattered, contradictory and primarily conceptual fragments, and even my own answers confused me upon rereading.

Within the resulting morass were some lovely little gems from Mierle Ukeles. As part of her response to the question "How do you define social practice?" Ukeles wrote:

"Listen, I sort of hate all these words. When I talk in a college and students ask 'What history do you want to be part of: feminist art, ecological art, environmental art?' I ask 'Why do I have to choose? I don't want to choose. Blast me out of all of these boxes."

Later, to a question asking what drew each of us to engage in social practice as a medium, she answered:

"I have been trying to articulate the implications of democratic culture for decades, where everyone is IN the picture. This state of everyone IN the picture has never existed before in the history of the world. The geometry of this, how to actually picture this, embody this, is stupefying.

How can one even begin? What you are calling the medium of social practice is a natural way [to] at least begin to work here."

And finally, to the question "Why do you think artists are turning to pedagogical practice now? i.e. starting schools, running workshops, etc." Ukeles responded:

"It's not so lonely. It gives you an excuse to talk to other people and still feel like you're working, to have them be in the workspace with you, to talk things over. That's one reason. Another is that somehow everyone is getting art degrees, even PhDs. So it could be part of not wanting to leave school... ever..."

I begin this article—that is, a document of an altogether different project—by quoting Ukeles's

Using art and design to improve public participation in planning and politics of the city is characteristic of the work of the Center for Urban Pedagogy. In this case, they worked with City-as-School, an alternative for students in New York City who are not thriving in traditional high schools. Through their "externship" program, young people are able to partner on projects with nonprofit organizations and receive school credit. Net neutrality, cable topologies

"The 28 minute documentary also features cardboard period hats, traveling Skittles and an extra-terrestrial excluded from a dance party."

and distributional conflicts are some of the topics discussed in The Internet is Serious Business, part of CUP's Urban Investigations series. The 28 minute documentary also features cardboard period hats, traveling Skittles and an extra-terrestrial excluded from a dance party.

Five students from City-as-School worked with teaching artist Helki Frantzen to investigate, understand, and convey what the Internet is, how it works, who owns it and what that means. The media advocacy group People's Production House (PPH)

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responses to questions on social practice for a reason: to note an ambivalence that many of us engaged in these expanded cultural practices feel when trying to define what it is we do—especially within the context of the art world. We ask a lot from work that exists in such ambiguous space, that stands as both medium and genre, and that often concurrently claims to be fine art product, social justice action, culturally relevant pedagogy, and more.

The theme selected for this magazine's current issue is "Education as Art," a useful perspective from which to catalog and remark upon the recent rise—we might even call it a trend—of artist-run pedagogical projects. This is especially helpful as ventures like Michael Cataldi and Nils Norman's *University of Trash*, works by the Bruce High Quality Foundation, and other projects find their way into mainstream art institutions, art criticism, and, quite likely, art history. But not yet resolved within the dialogue regarding so many of these new education-as-art experiments is how to measure their success. That is to say: that which makes for an interesting work of art does not inherently measure up as "successful" pedagogy.

This calls to mind Claire Bishop's critique of such expand art practice—practices, I ought mention, that I often utiliz my own work. In her 2006 essay for Artforum, "The Socia Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents," Bishop raises important concerns with the yardstick for "success" in thi line of work—albeit in a quest to define success from the perspective of aesthetics. Bishop writes:

"For these and other supporters of socially engaged art, the creative energy of participatory practices rehumanizes—or least de-alienates—a society rendered numb and fragmente by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism. But the urgency of this political *task has led to a situation in which such collaborative practices are automatically perceived to be equally important* artistic *gestures of resistance: There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works collaborative art because all are equally essential to the tas of strengthening the social bond."*

Bishop's call for better measures of success within participatory, littoral, collaborative, community-based, et

art stems from a desire to address such works within a contemporary art context. Thus, one easy way out of the quagmire is to simply avoid the "art" label altogether—no nasty nagging concerns of aesthetics if we instead simply call artist-run pedagogy projects "schools."

And yet many of the individuals behind such works—for example, Bruce Barber with his *Reading Rooms* or Harrell Fletcher and his work with students at Portland State University's MFA in Art and Social Practice—do self-identify as artists working in social practice or some other such shading of these concepts. This likely stems, at least in part, from the philosophical influence of John Dewey on both progressive education—his 1900 text "The School and Society," for instance—and on generations of artists reading (or as filtered through secondary sources) Dewey's 1934 tract on aesthetics, entitled "Art as Experience." Like much of Dewey's writing, these texts emphasize that both our experiences in education and our understandings of aesthetics must be considered in terms of our social environments, conditions, and interactions. That is, school and art are each participatory, experiential, and

assisted in financing and distribution. CUP and PPH financed the $15,000 project together through a series of grants. One of the parties interviewed in the film, Manhattan Neighborhood Network (MNN) provided equipment, such as the deck, tripod and Panasonic PD170 used in the making of the movie. (Ironically, MNN is funded by Time Warner, RCN and Verizon, some of the parties questioned in the film.) Part of the grants also financed the students' summer youth employment salary. In the spring, teenagers earned school credit.

During the spring and summer of 2008, Frantzen and the students met two to three times a week for four hours at a time. While they trained to interview and use the camera, Frantzen worked with CUP staff to develop a series of exercises to get the group excited about the subject matter. Her first major challenge: "How was I going to get a group of teenagers to care about such a complicated and potentially dry

process-oriented social practices. In fact, for Dewey—and, subsequently, for many of my fellow social practitioners—learning and education are *an art practice.*

So what might a successful example of pedagogy art practice look like?

A far more difficult task than measuring the aesthetic success of education-as-art projects is to flip perspectives and attempt to measure these community-based or artist-run free schools, skillshares, and other non-traditional pedagogical art practices based instead upon their merits as *schools.* Now what does "success" look like? This requires a completely different set of criteria, criteria that is far less abstract. In a search for successful models of alternative, non-traditional, participatory pedagogy—especially if we are to look within communities of artists and designers—I can think of no better example than the Brooklyn-based Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP).

As described by their website, CUP is a not-for-profit organization that "makes educational projects about places and how they change." In their educational programming, they do this through a participatory process they refer to as "Urban Investigations"—that is, participants in CUP curriculum engage in experiential learning projects where they observe, document, and engage directly in the civic processes, community organizing, urban planning, design resolutions, and other systems and factors that define and construct the city in which they live. This might be realized through, for example, a video documenting the food supply chain that results in a Bronx bodega or by way of a collection of comic books responding to the prison industrial complex or within a series of youth-produced charrettes encouraging participants' peers to better understand their own neighborhood. This diversity of output is one of CUP's many strengths: like a potent mix of John Dewey's hands-on learning methodologies, Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer*, and Malcolm X's "By Any Means Necessary."

And yet CUP stresses that they are not an artist collective engaged in a sort of expanded social practice. Nor is CUP non-hierarchical: they have a board of directors, an executive director and other administration, and a roster of freelance teaching artists and designers. When I jokingly referred to the "sweat equity" that goes into keeping an organization like CUP afloat, founder and board chair Damon Rich was quick to correct me: this is wage labor here, not a skillshare or coop.

They made a deliberate organizational decision to not identify as a collaborative art practice—a decision that has served them well, given CUP's role as facilitators and supporters of organizers in communities that certainly don't need pesky artists abstracting or obfuscating their social conditions. Despite the terminology, they still stand out as a successful example of a style of collaborative pedagogical creative practice increasingly common in contemporary art.

CUP is included in Nato Thompson's 2008 traveling exhibition with Independent Curators International, *Experimental Geography*. Included in the show are infographic maps

topic? "One of the first design activities was to have each student write a letter to his/her great-great-grandparents, describing the Internet. Another entailed visualizing the medium." One of the kids' illustrations was all about money and power, with dollar signs everywhere," she said with a laugh. Although the exercises stimulated the students' ability to communicate abstract information, they revealed much more about each student than the Internet's workings per se. Thus, Frantzen was eventually able to delegate tasks based on interests and strengths. The alien storyline, for example, evolved from a particular student's interest in science fiction.

In one skit he drinks varying amounts of Gatorade while the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" is played at different speeds, in order to illustrate differences in Internet connections.

In addition to basic media training, the first half of the project were dedicated to interviewing some 15 Internet experts and stakeholders, such as an electrophysics professor, the Manhattan Neighborhood Network, and Empire City Subway,

(called here "Education Display Systems") from an early urban investigation into possible design solutions to New York City's post-Fresh Kills garbage chain, entitled *Garbage Problems*. In conversation with Rich, he described this project from 2002 as instrumental in formulating the current CUP pedagogical model. First, there was a design problem to resolve: the city had recently closed Fresh Kills—at the time, the world's largest landfill—to turn the site into an environmental art park but had not devised a long-term solution to deal with garbage that once traveled to the Staten Island dump. Next, there was an investigation into the process of resolving such an issue: students from New York's City-as-School program collaborated with CUP to travel the city, attending policy meetings, interviewing city officials, and documenting their process. And finally, the resulting documents developed were designed for use in further expanded educational practices: the maps and infographics created through this investigation are excellent educational tools for explaining how New York manages its garbage chain.

Rich, former executive director Rosten Woo, and early CUP participant Andrea Meller write about the urban investigation process they developed during this project in an accompanying essay for a recent exhibition:

*"[*Garbage Problems*] presented the results of a semester's worth of site visits to bureaucratic offices, public hearings, waste transfer stations, and corporate office parks, archive research, and interviews with the garbage brokers and residents of Garbage City. [CUP's] education model brings citizens to the far-flung scenes of decision-making processes: public hearings, community meetings, and government offices…to solve mundane infrastructure problems by working to expand the reach and comprehensibility of democratic outreach."*

This last phrase, "the reach and comprehensibility of democratic outreach," recalls Mierle Ukeles's desire for a democratic process "where everyone is in the picture." In essence, through the *Garbage Problems* urban investigatio CUP facilitated a lesson in civics by engaging with their students in the civic processes that construct our world. A sentence on CUP's website expands upon this idea: "Our work grows from a belief that the power of imagination is central to the practice of democracy and that the work of governing must engage the dreams and visions of citizens." current executive director Christine Gaspar stated, it is a concept essential to the CUP philosophy that "design is tool of power."

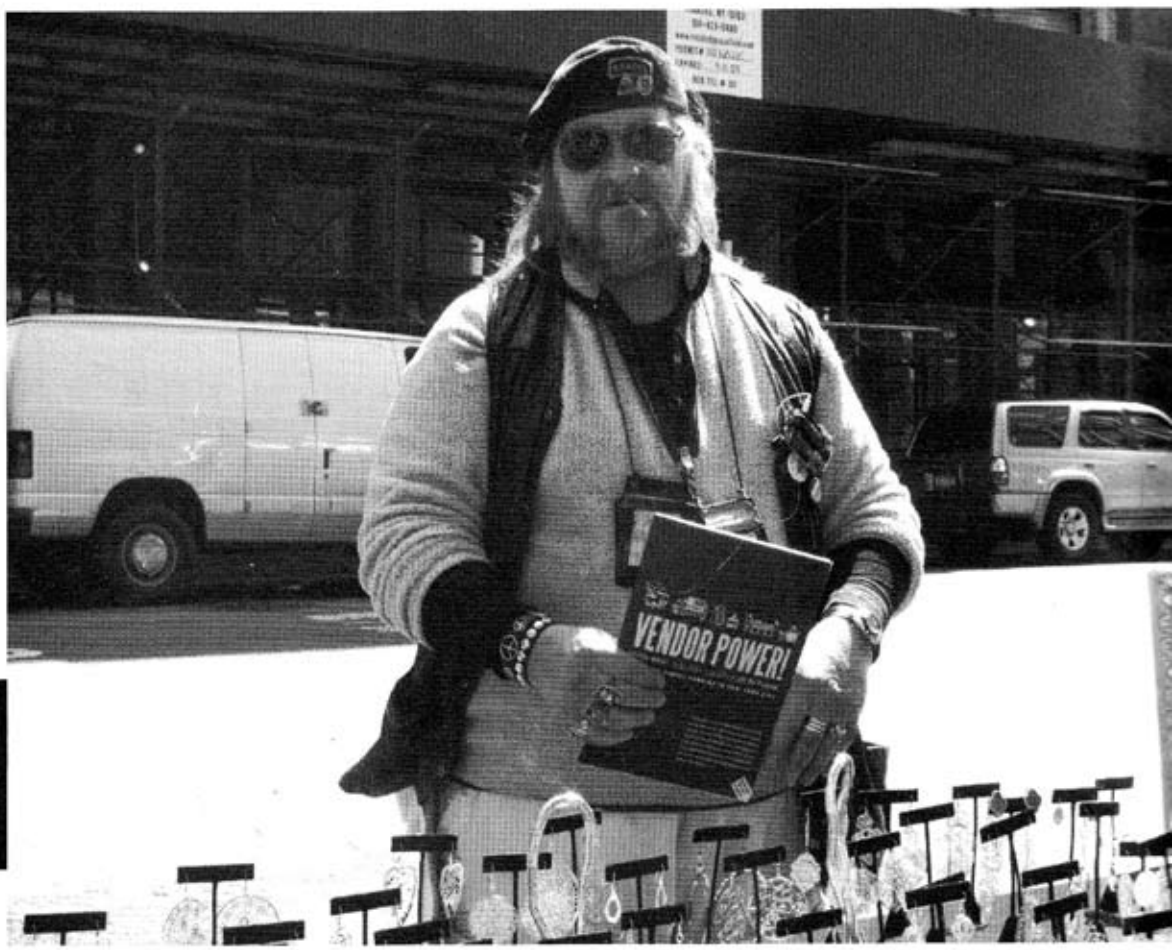
Gaspar referred to CUP's structure as a hub and spoke model: their small office in Brooklyn's historic Old American Can Factory houses the staff and daily operations while their influence and collaborations extend across all five boroughs. This hub and spoke analogy also fittingly describes the role that CUP plays as a facilitator, connecting interested parties in the myriad projects they oversee. Take, for example, their *Making Policy Public* educational pamphlet program. The idea is simple enough: advocacy organizations need well-designed materials to be used as educational and organizing outreach tools while well-intentioned artists and designers want to get paid for working on projects that suit both their skill sets and their moral values. As matchmaker, CUP's role in this process is far more complex than simply passing along a few names and email addresses. Woo described spending numerous hours

a company responsible for maintaining underground conduits. In a sense, the students' participation was more of an apprenticeship in documentary filmmaking than an internship at a not-for-profit. "Teenagers make good urban investigators because they are direct and good at breaking down information," states Valeria Mogilevich, Youth Education Coordinator and Program Manager at CUP. "Also, it is unlikely that someone will refuse to speak to a group of high-schoolers."

The final five months (the project took nine months to complete) were reserved for editing the interviews and creating sequences that would tie the final product together. Every student learned stop-motion animation techniques and took part in a Photoshop workshop. Brian Garrido, now 22, did much of the editing and stop-motion, as well as acting in some of the short theatrical sketches that make up the narrative. In one skit he drinks Gatorade while the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" is played at different speeds, in order to illustrate differences in Internet connections. He says, "Because of the project, filmmaking is something I can see myself doing in the future."

facilitating conversations between different parties involved in each incarnation of this project. The first step is to put out a call to advocacy groups with limited budgets in need of well-designed outreach materials. Then CUP solicits submissions from artists and designers interested in, as their website puts it, "engag[ing] in social issues without sacrificing experimentation." CUP ultimately oversees the design process as the liaison between artists and organizers who don't always communicate their ideas effectively without an interested intermediary. "Other concerns include securing grant money to pay the research and design team for their work and to cover the printing costs of the final product so that many of the pamphlets can be given away to the advocacy organization's base.

It is well worth all the effort, as the results have been remarkable and notably long- term. One document, a map designed by Thumb with cartographic data by historian Bill Rankin, traces choke points in the global shipping and cargo chain to be used as a labor-organizing tool by the Longshore Workers' Coalition. Another pamphlet, *Predatory Equity: The Survival Guide*, developed for housing activist organizations Tenants and Neighbors and the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board by MTWTF, effectively explains the complexities of predatory equity in plain language. Another project, *Vendor Power! A Guide to Street Vending in New York City*, outlines the myriad convoluted rules regulating the city's street vendors in five different languages and through humorous and helpful drawings.



Created by artist Candy Chang in conjunction with New York's Street Vendor Project, *Vendor Power!* was so well received by the design community that it was included in the National Design Triennial at the Cooper-Hewitt.

It is telling that, in the Cooper-Hewitt triennial, Chang is listed as *Vendor Power!'s designer*, with The Street Vendor Project as "author," and CUP as the "client." Because CUP is not a social practice artist collective—like the Turkish group Oda Projesi or the Bruce High Quality Foundation, for instance,—they don't get credit in the institutional art world for ultimately producing the project. And yet, that isn't the point of CUP's output: projects like *Garbage City* and *Making Policy Public*—like youth-made videos about New York City's drinking water or the Bodega food supply chain or their Envisioning Development Toolkit website for simplifying issues of zoning and affordable housing—are about community empowerment through creativity, design, and critical thinking. Though there is a CUP model, a tailored curriculum, and an overarching design philosophy at work, art world authorship takes a backseat to CUP's call for "democratic outreach" with the same sense of political "urgency" as noted in Claire Bishop's *Social Turn*. And yet despite of (and indeed, because of) not identifying as a social practice art project, CUP is a success as measured by the aesthetics of their output as well as in the effectiveness of their pedagogical practice. ◆

The interviews --which lasted approximately 2 hours each-- along with several skits and animations, resulted in about 60 hours of rough footage and an eerie discovery: Internet service in New York City has virtually no competition. People's Production House was aware of the mysterious circumstances in which the Internet operates and initially approached CUP to make The Internet is Serious Business. "People should have an understanding of how the Internet works," asserts PPH's Josh Breitbart, who sees the Internet as "a metaphor for how many governments and corporations operate." CUP, on the other hand, has been experimenting with project-oriented research on urban planning issues since 2002; previous Urban Investigation topics include garbage collection and public housing. While PPH uses The Internet is Serious Business as an advocacy tool, CUP sees as it as an educational project.

Neither students nor teaching artist were familiar with the topic. Frantzen, who holds a master's degree in sculpture, was hired two weeks before the project began. She says that her role was to direct and to digest all the information with the students. "Having the kids' voices is such a part of CUP's projects. If I designed everything, their personalities wouldn't show through." She continues, "The whole project is educational. The teens involved learn media, confidence and creative skills. And everyone-- students, audience and teaching artist-- learn about the subject matter itself."

The result is a collaborative design/educational/ advocacy tool that has been viewed by thousands. The Internet is Serious Business, which can be seen on PPH's and CUP's websites (via Vimeo), has also been screened in media policy conferences in Minneapolis and Detroit (PPH financed the students' trips to both). The 28 minute format is not coincidental, either, that being the maximum length for a video to play on public access television. The recently released DVD comes with a 35-page educator's guide so that, as Breitbart says, "people don't need an expert to discuss the future of the Internet." ◆