

Humboldt Journal of Social Relations
The Art of Social Justice
Jennifer Miles and Laura Dawson

Introduction

As this HJSR special issue on social justice unfolded, it became clear to the editorial team that this publication would be incomplete without addressing the well-documented role of art in social justice movements. We asked two of our managing editors, Jennifer Miles and Laura Dawson, to research and write about this area of social action. They interviewed two artists, a spoken word performer and a visual artist, both of whom understand their art as part of larger social justice projects. These artists raise awareness, highlight obstacles and avenues for change, and create space for solidarity and sanctuary. The following montage situates their artistry within their own biographies and a rich history of social change through art. Mary Virnoche and Jennifer Eichstedt, Editors.

Visual and performing arts are woven into the histories of many movements for social change. The Black Arts and Feminist Arts movements of the 1960's and 1970's left us an exciting repository of paintings, poetry, music and more (Collins 2006; Gardner-Hugget 2007). Artists do more than document change. The artist, as well as the art, inform and shape change (Martinez 2007). Art simultaneously draws from culture and produces culture. In this sense art is political "because meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power" (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998:7). Art can redefine social power through creating space that is safe and inclusive, allowing people to connect their personal stories with those of others in the struggle for justice, develop ways to deal with the struggle, and inspire hope.

As a way of situating social justice on a personal level, poetry evokes in the listener/reader a visceral reaction to lived experience. In the literature examining the role of poetry in social justice work, authors acknowledge the power of poetry to personalize struggles for autonomy and agency, and to give a voice to sometimes impersonal discourses of oppression and injustice. As

radical feminist Carol Hanisch (1970) noted, "the personal is political."

While academics study inequality in ways that provide statistical as well as narrative understanding of causes and consequences, poets deepen our understanding of that inequality by giving powerful voice to its effects. By speaking with naked emotions such as rage, helplessness, frustration, and hope, poetry delivers a perspective of inequality many individuals may never have encountered were it not for the poet baring their soul. This interpersonal dialectic inspires empathy, which can spur social action in the poet's audience. Clay (2006) and Reed (2005) write of poetry as a culture-building tool within social movements. McCaughan (2006) and Anzaldúa (2002) write of the depth of knowing (conocimiento) that art and poetry provide, in contrast and in addition to intellectual methods of inquiry and related narrative forms. Audre Lorde makes a strong case for the transformative potential of poetry and the emotions it portrays and evokes in protest to a pervasive culture of "institutional dehumanization" (1978).

Traditionally, the social scientific academic world has studied art and poetry in social justice movements using a variety of

interpretations and lenses. More recently, social scientists themselves have called upon their colleagues to embrace broader forms for both exploring questions and presenting their research. In these actions they further blur disciplinary distinctions and the boundaries between researcher, participant and performer.

In this endeavor, we honor what our colleagues in the arts have long known – the power of the arts to help us discover, understand and change the world around us. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) suggest a spectrum of “creative analytic processes” that include poetry, readers’ theater, comedy and satire, among many other art forms, as means for communicating social justice work in ways that resonate with larger audiences and academics alike. Likewise, Denzin (2003) explores “performance ethnography” as a method for authoring autoethnographic insights in his recent project on racial justice. These research shifts link to work on critical pedagogy (Friere 1970/2007; hooks 1994; Giroux 2011; Kincheloe 2004). Critical pedagogy centers the identities, experiences, and existing knowledge of communities of learners. It also asks those interested in social change to engage communities in critical discourse and linking their own lives to collective experience and actions for change. In these processes, whether in traditional classrooms or in grassroots organizing spaces, art remains a powerful tool for learning about and expressing actions for change.

In the following section, Vanessa Pike-Vrtiak addresses the “institutional dehumanization” faced by those who work in social justice. She also creates a safe place for expression, a place away from the desk, where she and her audience are free to passionately disagree with people who would deny social justice to others. People who are themselves the recipients of historical social justice work, yet object to social justice efforts for groups “not like them.” From this safe place,

Vanessa and her audience may voice their frustration at the roadblocks they encounter.

Humanizing the 9-5—An Interview with Vanessa Pike-Vrtiak

It’s important that, no matter the style of art, human beings should practice listening to what the artist and the piece are trying to say—Vanessa Pike-Vrtiak

Vanessa Pike-Vrtiak was born in Santa Barbara and raised in Humboldt County, and she has been writing since she learned how to read. Vanessa considers art to be the perfect accompaniment to social justice and action. The struggle to achieve social justice is at times overwhelming. Art, according to Vanessa, delivers social justice themes to an audience in a way that is aesthetically pleasing, yet no less visceral for its beauty.

“The 9-5” was written using the same process Vanessa uses for the rest of her repertoire. Vanessa reads and listens and watches the world. When she is struck by a particular aspect of society, she engages in “free-flow writing,” putting down in words what she is thinking and feeling; not editing, not limiting herself, allowing each piece to emerge as a whole entity, unbounded by literary convention. The finished piece is most often produced in this fashion, seldom edited or retouched.

Vanessa intends her poetry to give a voice to those whose voices are largely silenced in mainstream society. Vanessa also hopes to hold a mirror up to those who may never otherwise understand how their beliefs harm others, as seen in the featured piece “The 9-5.” Vanessa had her first job after graduation with an organization that works with at-risk youth when she met “an old grandmother in a cowboy blouse” who so strongly opposed homosexuality that she was unwilling for her grandson to receive help if it were to come from “one of them.” This experience affected

Vanessa deeply: "I wanted this woman to hear herself, so I created this piece."

Through live performance, Vanessa's poetry takes on aspects of social action in creating a space for social justice to be discussed among a wide range of people. As Vanessa states, "there is immense power in spoken word and standing by what makes us human and different: our ideas. I feel like when I give my piece a voice, ideas come alive. They burn with the same fire in which they were written." Vanessa is the founder of the "A Reason to Listen" poetry collective and produces a local television program of the same name as well as organizing regular live poetry readings and community consciousness-raising events. Vanessa has traveled the United States performing her works, including a performance at the Apollo Theater in New York, and has self-published four anthologies of poetry.

The 9-5

by Vanessa Pike-Vrtiak

Sometimes it's hard to not take work home with you
especially when you sit across from an old grandmother in a cowboy blouse
Wrangler jeans, wrinkles as bleak and drained as the death of an October sky
telling you: her grandson can't be around homosexuals
and the history of a homosexual deserves no voice
only baseball bats to the precious lips of surrogate skulls

and no matter how long I hold my breath
how long I stand in silence
allowing her to eat all that is between us
I cannot change her heart
I cannot pronounce this generation dead
snap it under the cufflinks
And hear its consciousness hit the coffin
Because who am I to dance between right and wrong
to lick the triumphs of tolerance
off her nicotine stained fingertips

I cannot catch too much sunlight in her eyes
Because I don't want to believe that she is overtly loving
I cannot bash her police loudspeakers
that document every personal story near her bedside

I cannot apologize to her grandson
that is half coffee and half crème
tell him that one day he will be able to learn that the other half of his heritage
is out there waiting for him to unbury it
shameless in the noon day sun

instead I'd rather let her fantasize in her ignorance
read her misconceptions their Miranda rights
and bleach her middle
so she can no longer remember what her body identifies with
and instead be content as human

In The “9-5,” Vanessa translates the stifling frustration of words unspoken into a public poetry slam that engages her audience in the struggle for equality. From here, the editorial team moves on to the work of visual artist Eduardo Valadez, who uses words in his artwork to jar his viewers out of their comfort zones. Eduardo’s work defies convention in its many incarnations and its layers of subversive meaning. Through his artwork, Eduardo continues to learn and educate others in an ongoing dialogue of social justice consciousness-raising.

Graffiti to Grassroots: An Interview with Eduardo Valadez

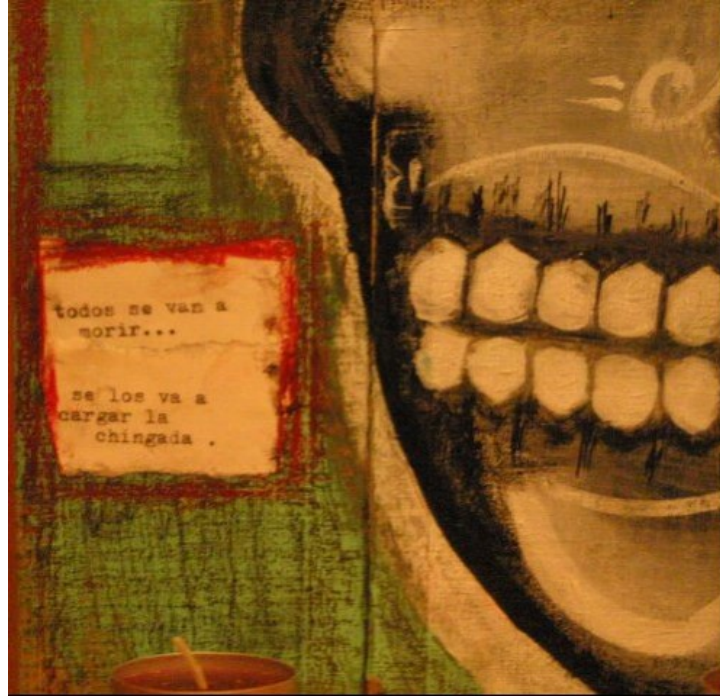
Eduardo Valadez Arenas was born in Mexico City in 1986. He and his mother immigrated to the U.S. in the early 1990s to join his father who had come here to find work. He spent most of his young adulthood in a predominantly Latino neighborhood in Thousand Palms, California. Today he lives in the Bay Area finishing an undergraduate degree in Community Arts at the California College of the Arts.

When he was about 15 years old, Eduardo started exploring art as an outlet for his experiences and feelings. Graffiti gave him the greatest sense of agency:

[Graffiti] allowed me to be out in the world and really say what I wanted to out loud, with no restrictions and no one to answer to. That’s something I seldom get to do nowadays, working within organizations or in the art world in general.

He considers graffiti to be a form of guerilla art, and although he still practices it, he tries to keep it separate from the art he

does in institutions. Eduardo’s art is tightly linked with his activism, graffiti roots and language as action. He uses Spanish ‘slang’ within his creations.



So I think showing work in an institution or gallery setting layered with these words that are in Spanish, words that everybody is familiar with, is really how it starts to build this kind of activist layer. I think Spanish, speaking



Food = Energy

Spanish, and being Mexican still is very much taboo. And if not taboo, it is still a touchy subject, ironically enough. I mean, we think we've gotten to this place where we are very diverse as a country, but there is still a source of power and that source of power is middle aged, white men with money, all three things that I'm not. I am an American now. I've lived in the United States for 20 years. I go to a college that is predominantly white and the professors are predominantly white. Through using the language that is not the norm, I feel it will invoke those feelings of "We're not what he is. How will we interpret this art? How do we interpret these words that we don't know?"

By embedding Spanish slang within institutionally sanctioned artwork, Eduardo potentially engages several dialogues among those who witness his work. For the white, middle and upper class non-Spanish speaking patrons, his work asks them to live in a space – even if fleeting – in which they may not fully comprehend their surroundings. This is a space in which new immigrants with limited English speaking abilities are very familiar. For those who share Eduardo's identity as a Spanish speaker, his artwork insists through its presence in the institution: "we belong."

He notes that life becomes a struggle to "assimilate or function in dual environments." As an immigrant, he feels society pressures him to be culturally 'American,' but Eduardo also feels pressure from home to be culturally 'Mexican.' Many others like Eduardo, who have occupied multiple, often competing, identities, have expressed both the challenges and opportunities of living in these liminal spaces (DuBois 1903; Anzaldua 1987; Collins 2000; Anzaldua & Keating 2002). One of the ways he addressed the struggles of multiple identi-

ties was through an art project with a local high school.

It was the summer of 1992 when I arrived to Southern California, the place that would be my home for the next two decades and a half. De El Distrito Federal a La Frontera Norte Americana llege. This moment has served to be an anchor to my identity as an immigrant, pocho, mojado, wetback, traveler, and artist, as well as a translatable character living in a country of immigrants.

In 2011, I had the opportunity to share this story with the Students of Berkeley High Arts and Humanities Academy as the Visiting Artist on the "From Here to There" interdisciplinary project. The project focused on techniques in performance, visual arts, English, and science to tell stories of immigrants who had come to call Berkeley home. Together we created a series of memory boxes that would serve as capsules to the stories.

The students who participated in this project represented nine different nationalities. The memory boxes represented their lived experiences navigating American culture and the cultures of countries from which they migrated.

Most recently, Eduardo undertook a new project that allowed him to continue his work with kids. He began working with





Phat Beets, an Oakland-based food justice program connecting small farmers to urban communities and facilitating youth leadership (Phat Beets 2012). This project expanded Eduardo's own social justice knowledge as he researched issues of food and inequalities for his art-based project: "I found out the role food played in the conquest of the Americas, and how that plays a role in my own personal ancestral identity." He read *Open Veins of Latin America* (Galeano 1973) and was also mentored by Chicano poet and singer Ricardo Tijerina. He translated this new knowledge about food into an artistic and informational bean bag game he set up outside Children's Hospital in Oakland that helped get kids thinking and asking questions about food origins.

The game was used (centuries ago) by farmers and Native Americans (using) beanbags often filled with seeds. As a metaphor, I thought that that was something that I could work with... I added informational facts about family farms, urban farms and commercial farms. The information tells how far a family farm is from you, how far an urban farm is from you.

The bean bags also included information about the pros and cons of urban and commercial farms, as well as nutrition information. Along with the game, he created an educational poster with more in-depth information about family and urban farms.

Since learning about the food justice movement, Eduardo plans to give more of his attention to food issues in Mexico:



I want to do a series of handmade books, maybe large format books or a scroll-like project, to address a lot of these issues. ...in Mexico there is this really unconscious approach to the consumption of unhealthy food. I want to be a voice for that.

While Eduardo still loves the traditional art forms such as painting and bookmaking, he found power in community art:

I find that this interactive type of art making, which in many people's eyes is not art at all but community organizing, is the best way to advocate and effect change.

Jennifer Miles will receive her BA in Sociology from Humboldt State University in December of 2012. She is a traveler, a writer, and a Jane of All Trades. Jennifer plans to continue her education in graduate school studying global systems and their inbuilt inequalities.

Laura Dawson recently graduated with a BA in Sociology from Humboldt State University. She is an activist, poet and rock climber. In Fall 2012 she will begin her MA in Sociology at HSU focusing on environmental justice.

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