Guerrilla Art Action: Taking It to the Street with Teenage Students

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In this essay, author Steven Ciampaglia reflects on the creation of a guerilla art course he and a colleague designed to engage students in the process of creating contemporary art relevant to them outside the traditional classroom setting. He examines how reflecting on his teaching practices led him to rethink the key objectives and design features of the course. Ciampaglia chronicles his experiences working with students as they wrestled with the various challenges involved in conceptualizing and executing a collaborative guerilla art project. He reflects on the ways in which his own assumptions and teaching practices interacted with the interests and efforts of the students to produce a successful and replicable teaching model.

In my current capacity as an assistant professor of art education at Northern Illinois University, I teach a course that introduces students to the work of contemporary artists. It is not uncommon for students at the outset of this course to voice derision toward the artworks I present to them. My first reaction is to passionately defend the works of art, explaining precisely why I consider them worthy of study. Whenever this impulse hits, I pause and remember an experience from early in my teaching career when I learned that it is best to let students discover for themselves why something is worth learning, with minimal comment from me. What follows is a recollection of this experience: the development and instruction of a performative secondary art class inspired by collective contemporary artistic practice, Guerrilla Art Action.

By the winter of 2003, I had been teaching art courses at various community centers around Chicago for several years. In teaching these courses, I had grown increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of my art lessons. As a practicing artist, I created lessons that were rooted within the contemporary artistic practice of the time. To my surprise, my students were having difficulty relating to the social and political dimensions of these contemporary art forms, even though many of these forms involved visual and creative prac-

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tices familiar to the students, such as graffiti, comic book art, video art, and computer-based digital and new media art. For instance, I thought that my students would viscerally respond to the examples of graffiti art that I showed to them. I anticipated that they would immediately recognize the challenge to cultural hegemony and authority that I believed graffiti embodied, but to my dismay the students were not interested in these aspects of graffiti. They were most intrigued by the creative visual stylizations employed by the graffiti artists who created these artworks. I was not expecting this reaction, because I believed that the sociopolitical critiques and concerns expressed in these works were relatable to the life experiences of these students, shaped as they were by the social and economic influences of their urban existences.

At this impasse in my teaching practice, I received an invitation from Marwen, one of the community art centers at which I had been teaching, to propose a course for their upcoming spring 2003 term, Marwen: Off the Wall. The term would allow Marwen to offer its adolescent students courses that would be even more experimental and novel than its already progressive course offerings. Around this time, I also began a creative collaboration with media artist Kerry Richardson. Like me, she had taught in Chicago-area community centers for several years and had encountered some of the same difficulties that I had experienced. She was also open to the idea of proposing an experimental course offering for Marwen's Off the Wall term, so we decided to create a joint proposal.

Intrigued by the possibilities and the potential collaboration with Kerry, yet stymied by my frustrations with what I perceived as my students' disengagement, I began to reflect on my teaching experiences. I recognized that I had made several assumptions about my adolescent, urban students. Because my students and I had similar class and ethnic backgrounds, I wrongly assumed that they would also share my social and political concerns and interests. I also realized that the students may not have been particularly receptive to the contemporary works of art I was showing them because of their prior experiences learning art in school. For example, when I asked students to define *art* or to name an artist, they nearly always referred back to artists they had learned about in school: Van Gogh, Picasso, Monet, or other artists associated with the so-called "modern art cannon." Finally, it dawned on me that I might have overestimated my students' ability to work independently and collaboratively, with minimal direction from me.

Up to that point, I had always attempted to create a learning environment in my courses that allowed students greater latitude in determining their learning objectives and the methods by which they met those objectives. I had never considered how my students would operate within this environment, especially since the great majority of them attended public schools in Chicago. Chicago Public Schools, like many large educational bureaucracies, employs a structured, top-down system of knowledge transmission in order to maximize students' standardized test results (Illich, 1971; Schorr, 1996). It occurred to

me that my students may be unaccustomed to a classroom experience that provides opportunity for free discussion, synthetic analysis, and creative exploration and collaboration.

As Kerry and I worked on the objectives of the course, we were guided by these reflections. We thought carefully about how the objectives would address our concerns and how the design of the course might best achieve these objectives. First, we wanted the course to engage students with contemporary art practices and social issues that exist outside the confines of the students' public school art classroom experiences. Students would be introduced to the work of cutting-edge performative art collectives who eschew art galleries for the immediacy of socially engaged public art installations and performances. Second, we hoped the course would teach students to work independently and collaboratively in a critical, reflective, and respectful manner. Therefore, the pedagogy employed would have to be student-centered, problem posing, and critically multicultural. Through dialogue and reflection, students would be compelled to examine their own biases and see how these biases affect their conception of society and their roles within it. Third, we thought the course should expand the parameters of art instruction by pushing students to work in activist and performative methods of art production usually excluded from school art classrooms. Students would be required to work collaboratively, addressing a social issue important to them through street theater performance in the style practiced by contemporary activist art collectives.

Kerry and I believed the best way to meet these objectives was for both of us to play the role of facilitator and co-conspirator rather than traditional classroom teacher. We planned to offer no direct suggestions or criticism to the students but would instead encourage them to respond to one another as they progressed toward the goal of defining, developing, and mounting their sociopolitical performance art project. In the process, we would model for them a dialogic method of inquiry that would demonstrate a holistic and critically independent means of learning.

The proposal for the course was enthusiastically received and approved by Marwen's education department. The course, titled Guerrilla Art Action, commenced in the spring of 2003. The class met once a week for six weeks. Each class session lasted two hours and thirty minutes. Eight adolescent students who ranged in age from fourteen to seventeen years enrolled in the course. These students were a diverse group that included five Latina students, two White female students, and one Asian American male student.

On the first day of class, we informed students that they would be working collaboratively on a project that they would determine and direct, with little input from us. We stressed that the project must address an issue that was of importance to them as urban teenagers, a subject they felt was not adequately known or understood by adults or individuals from cultural backgrounds different than their own. We also explained that the project would be site specific. They would be required to engage with their potential audience at a site

related to the issue addressed by the project. It would be playfully performative. They would temper the potential seriousness of their chosen topic with satire that would increase the accessibility of the project. The project would be multidisciplinary so that it could exploit the strengths of all the students in the course.

In order to provide students with historical context for their project, Kerry and I shared examples of work by several pioneering activist art collectives, including: Guerrilla Art Action Group, a band of New York City artists active from 1969 to 1973 who staged performative actions protesting several social and political issues, most notably the Vietnam War; Bread and Puppet Theater, a still-active group of New York puppeteers founded in the 1960s who stage socially and politically charged works of street theater with giant puppets; and Guerrilla Girls, a still-active group of feminist artists founded in New York City in the 1980s who draw attention to sexist practices in the art world through theatrical protest events where they conceal their identities with gorilla masks.

So that students could see how serious issues could be broached in a collaborative and satirical artistic manner, we also showed several contemporary examples of sociopolitically oriented, performance-based art projects produced by art collectives. These collectives included Temporary Services, a multicity collective of artists who produce and install provocative sculptures on the streets of several U.S. cities; Billionaires for Bush, a satirical lobbying organization for President George W. Bush comprised of artists masquerading as rich industrialists who hold mock fund-raising rallies, such as their auction of Social Security; the Radical Cheerleaders, a group of youthful performance artists who dress as cheerleaders and lead crowds of onlookers at street festivals and parades in socially and politically satirical chants; and Pink Bloque, a Chicago-based radical feminist dance troop that organizes and performs playful dance actions at various urban locations.

The students seemed genuinely surprised to learn about these types of artwork, which deviated so far from the historicized, canonical works they were accustomed to learning about in school. The immediacy afforded these artworks by their nontraditional settings and interactive elements were particularly intriguing to the students. Also intriguing to them was the collective nature of these types of work. Brimming with enthusiasm and motivation, the students began navigating the process of selecting a project topic on which they could all agree. This process started with a brainstorming session where students generated potential themes for their project.

During the discussion the students continually referenced a recent incident that had taken place at the upscale Glenbrook North Public High School in Glenbrook, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. Several female seniors were caught on tape brutally hazing female juniors while a crowd of fifty other students cheered them on. The hazing was so severe that ultimately five girls required hospital care. The videotape of the event made national headlines, was featured in a *Newsweek* story, and opened up a national discussion concerning the

increase in violent behavior in American teen culture (Johnson & Meadows, 2003). The female students in our class were particularly perturbed about the perception of teenage girls that these media stories were perpetrating. They felt that the images of teenage girls brutally beating one another depicted in the Glenbrook North tape, along with images of precociously sexualized teen starlets such as Britney Spears, created a perception among adults that teenage girls are sexually ravenous, out of control, and amoral. This led to a broader discussion regarding perceptions of minority teenagers held by White adults. Several of the Latina students felt that White adults perceived them to be "loud," "violent," and "easy." They believed that White adults unfairly stereotyped them as gangbangers and drug abusers. The Latina and Asian American students also believed that most White adults assumed that they were immigrants, likely illegal, and therefore could not speak English.

At this point in the discussion, the students started to become mired in their own individual concerns, with everyone advocating for their own particular topics. As the discussion came to a standstill, I started to become impatient at their difficulty in reaching consensus. I was tempted to intervene by offering my opinions on the stalemate. I exchanged glances with Kerry and could see that she was also growing impatient. We called for a break in the discussion.

During the break, Kerry and I reminded each other of our intent to refrain from didacticism and direct instruction. When class reconvened, Kerry and I reminded the students that they must come to an agreement about both the topic of the project and the manner in which this topic would be manifested within the parameters we set out. We suggested that they start this mediation by finding the commonalities among their various project suggestions.

This process was initially very difficult. All the students remained very defensive of their own personal conceptions of how they were perceived by adults. They seemed certain that the forms of discrimination they had personally identified were more acute than those suffered by their peers in the classroom. After much heated exchange and repeated assurances and reiterations from Kerry and me, a common theme started to coalesce. Gradually, the students concluded that the overriding issue of their concern was the stereotyping of all teenagers by adults, particularly the stereotyping of minority teenagers by White adults.

The class then moved on to deliberate how this theme could be addressed within the context of a street art performance. The students made several suggestions, including an invent-a-stereotype press workstation to be staged on a downtown street where passersby would be invited to invent a stereotype to match the appearance of a "live" teenager. Another suggestion was to create a street team of mock teen marketers who would offer teenage pedestrians free samples of satirical products, such as a line of T-shirts that featured stereotypes used to describe teens—*violent, drunk, sex-crazed, about to go wild,* etc. Another suggestion involved the students posing as researchers surveying individuals about their perceptions of other ethnic groups. The students defended and

deliberated their respective proposals. Again, Kerry and I reiterated to the students that they should focus on the commonalities among their proposals rather than the differences. As the students struggled to find this common ground, the room fell silent and the students grew listless. Kerry and I reluctantly intervened.

"Look," I said, "these project all have to do with the way you all think you are viewed by adults, particularly White adults, right?" The students all nodded their heads in agreement.

"Do you think these views that White adults have of you are accurate?" Kerry asked. "Do you think they are true?"

"No," stated Paul, the lone Asian American student in the class. "I am tired of White people always coming up to me and speaking loudly and slowly, like I can't understand them. Like they expect me to respond with 'me no speaky.'"

"Yeah, I am tired of that too," said Maribel. "Just because I am Mexican, White people think I can't speak English and that I am a gardener or landscaper."

"It's almost like they label you because it makes things easier for them," interjected Pinar, one of the Latina students.

"Yeah, maybe we should just do the labeling for them so they don't have to think at all," Paul blurted out. The students all laughed at Paul's comment. "No, I am serious," he said. "Let's create and hand out labels that do the work of stereotyping people for you."

And so the Committee for Better Labeling—a satirical advocacy organization whose mission is to facilitate snap judgments and promote stereotypes—was born.

The Committee for Better Labeling hit the streets of downtown Chicago on a blustery May morning. The students, dressed in lab coats and holding clipboards, distributed a mock survey to willing participants. The survey instructed respondents to match labels with corresponding individuals. Listed labels included *illegal, pervert, superficial, illiterate, sex-crazed, drunk, freak.* The choice of individuals offered as potential matches to these labels included teenager, Irish, Mexican, a forty-three-year-old White male, African American, goth, and young girl. On completion of the survey, respondents were given a packet of stickers mocking the stereotypical labels people assign to one another—*irresponsible, consumer, drunk, freak*—and invited to engage in labeling others.

The survey and sticker packet generated plenty of discussion between the students and respondents concerning the nature of the performance and the practice of stereotyping. Quite often, the most interesting comments came from individuals defending their refusal to take the survey. One young lady would not take the survey because it would mean that she "agreed with those stereotypes." An older gentleman called the survey "silliness" and then explained to the students that he would not take the survey because he does "not label anyone." But once the students explained the satirical nature of the project, he laughed and ultimately hugged them in appreciation of their

efforts. These interactions were documented on video and exhibited at Marwen's Spring Term Exhibition along with sample sticker packets, completed surveys, and blank surveys for gallery patrons to complete.

Following the opening night of the exhibition, Kerry and I conducted a group discussion with the students in the class. We asked them to reflect on their experience of conceiving, developing, and staging their street performance. The students mentioned the difficulty that they had arriving at a common theme for their project. One student summed up the process: "We all thought we were right and had the best idea, but we realized that not everyone can have the best idea if we want to work together." Another student elaborated, "Yeah, we all thought we needed to do something that was about us, but after we talked we realized we didn't now who *us* was. We had to talk some more to figure it out and to figure out what was important to us."

The greatest surprise to the students was the level of civil engagement that their performance engendered in individuals they encountered on the street. Another student said, "I thought all those people, especially the White people, would be really mad at us for talking about these things. Like, I thought they would think we're making fun of them. But they didn't. They really wanted to hear what we had to say." Yet another student elaborated in a slightly more

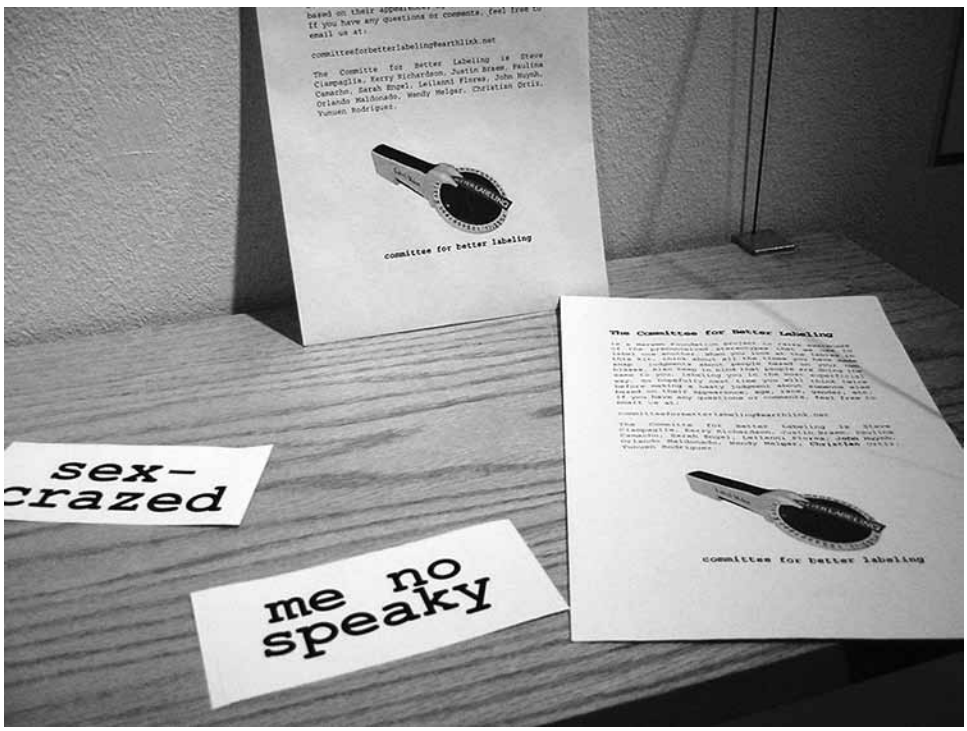

Image 1. *Committee for Better Labeling project description, sticker packet, and survey, as displayed at Marwen's Spring Term Exhibition. Photograph by Steven Ciampaglia.*

Image 2. *Committee for Better Labeling T-shirts featuring stereotypes used to describe teenagers, as displayed at Marwen's Spring Term Exhibition. Photograph by Steven Ciampaglia.*

blunt fashion: "I thought all these White people would be, like, 'Whoa, what are all these Black and Mexican kids doing coming up to me and asking me about these things. I ain't no racist.' But they weren't. They ended up being really cool with it." On hearing this, another student conjectured, "Maybe we were the one's stereotyping, or at least maybe we were just as guilty of labeling people as we thought they were." The rest of the students nodded their heads thoughtfully as the class grew momentarily silent.

Kerry and I looked at each other and nodded as well. We felt that the process of confrontation, debate, deliberation, and compromise that the students enacted with each other through the creation of their performance had initiated a process of cognitive dissonance wherein the students were forced to reflect on the certainty of their beliefs. This process was furthered through each interaction the students had with individuals whom they encountered while staging their performance. Each of these interactions repeated on a micro-scale that same process of confrontation, debate, deliberation, and compromise and further compelled the students to consider and question their own conceptions and beliefs.

I was relieved and happy that the students were able to reach this point. There were many instances during the project development stage where it appeared that the students would not be capable of finding common ground.

We did not anticipate that this would be the case. When we conceived the course, Kerry and I assumed that the students would more easily unite around a cause important to them but neglected by adults. However, the difficulty that the students had reaching consensus forced us to realize that we still had not quite overcome our own conception of teenagers as a monolithic social group. Refraining from didacticism allowed us to realize this misconception as the class progressed and to guide the students, sometimes uneasily, toward consensus.

We ultimately realized that no matter how protracted or uncomfortable this deliberation process became for the students and us, it was a necessary step in the students' development as socially engaged artists and citizens. In the end, we were glad that we utilized an approach that allowed each of the students to become a reflective thinker who constructed new knowledge of the world by examining his or her own beliefs in relation to the beliefs of other students in the class.

Through the process of conceiving, developing, and implementing this course, Kerry and I discovered the limitations of our influence as teachers. We were able to see how our previous pedagogical approaches may have relied too heavily on our respective positions as the teacher, on how we imposed our will on the students even though we intended otherwise. We came to see that even though we may have intellectually conceived of our adolescent students as artistic peers and collaborators, in practice we still dictated the focus and scope of the art projects we were teaching. As such, we learned that it is sometimes necessary to cede a greater modicum of classroom control to the students so that they can determine what topics are most worthy of critical exploration. Kerry and I also realized that our teaching dispositions were perhaps not as flexible as we previously imagined. We may have been more inclined to stick to predetermined lesson objectives rather than to seize educational opportunities and teaching moments as they presented themselves in the classroom.

Thanks to these realizations, I am now acutely aware of my power and influence as the course instructor. I understand that even though I may design a course to offset this imbalance of power, it always exists. Each minute of every class, I reflect on how I am presenting my concerns and myself to my students. Simultaneously, I am always cognizant of how my conception of students, as a group and as individuals, is affected by my constantly evolving position as the teacher. I now consider the reciprocal nature of this student-teacher relationship to be the overriding philosophical tenet of my teaching career. It is something I constantly strive to improve and refine through continued reflective teaching practice.

When it first emerged in New York in the spring of 2011, the Occupy movement demonstrated a model of peaceful mass civil protests where individuals worked together to effect positive social change. Similarly, it is our hope that the Guerrilla Art Action course can be used as a model of critical-democratic,

contemporary art instruction. Through the implementation of this model, our students became aware of the activist potential of art, experienced the process of political organizing and protest, created a contemporary sociopolitical performance artwork that is proactive rather than reactive and antagonistic, and critically challenged their own assumptions about society. This model also has the potential to provide art educators with an experimental environment in which they can reflect on their teaching practices, pedagogical dispositions, and interactions with students.

Some might argue that it is not the purview of art education to delve into matters of social and political activism. It is our view, however, that art has a long history of addressing the harsh realities and inconvenient truths of the times in which it is created. The art instruction that adolescent students receive should not focus strictly on the elements and principles of art but should instead integrate the learning of these elements and principles into a socially conscious curriculum that addresses the difficult issues of the times.

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