We Turned Your World Upside Down: Contemporary Art Practice in the High School Classroom and Spaces Beyond

BY JACK WATSON

When I came back to school after a day's absence, I was greeted with an unexpected sight. The four classroom computers were turned around and facing the window. This struck me as odd, and before I could think about why this was so, I noticed the posters on the wall were all turned upside down. Quickly scanning the room, I noticed every mobile object in the room had been inverted: the books on the shelves, the tub of oil pastels, the name tags on the lockers, the pictures on my desk, the labels on the drawers, the content of the drawers, the dust pan (now defying gravity and hanging straight up), even the writing on the chalkboard—my writing—had been converted to an upside down mirror image. One new phrase was added to the chalkboard in large inverted caps: "WE TURNED YOUR WORLD UPSIDE DOWN."

Two students were there to witness my reaction—my teaching assistant and a student arriving early to work on a project—and they laughed knowingly as I wandered the room, gawking at the detail, dumbstruck and slack-jawed. I looked up and pointed like a small-town tourist in the big city. After a number of unintelligible mutterings, I asked my teaching assistant, "Did my fourth period do this?" She laughed and said, "Yes."

I knew it was the creative work of fourth period and not (merely) an elaborate prank because it reflected the collaborative and playful atmosphere of our current project. My fourth period was working on a series of public space projects based on the contemporary practice of interventionist artists who seek to creatively transform spaces and disrupt the ritual of the everyday. In my own experience in this field, I had discovered a new creative energy and a revitalized faith in the relevance of art, collaboration, and creative play. I hoped, in creating public space projects of their own, that my students would discover this energy and faith as well. Judging by my upside down classroom, they already had. And the real public space projects had not even begun.
Strategies and Tactics: Introducing the Unit

The public space projects were collaborations among 20 students in various advanced art classes. The structure of the 3-week project was brisk, yet informal enough to allow ideas to develop organically. The first week was dedicated to knowledge building, the second week for planning, and the third week for implementation. On the first day, I took students outside into the sorts of spaces we would utilize to discuss the function and nature of spaces. In discussing subversive uses for spaces (“I’ve seen kids filming a skateboard video here,” for example), students demonstrated they already understood that public spaces are dynamic, organic geographies of lived experience in which norms are not fixed. We conducted Theatre of the Oppressed games here, which helped establish a playful, collaborative atmosphere as well as illustrate key concepts regarding our role as agents of creative resistance in a social realm.

The following day, I introduced the unit in detail and discussed some of the artists and collectives who are making meaningful work with public space. I emphasized action over object, and introduced the concept of monitored areas and creative disruption. We then watched several Improv Everywhere videos: Frozen Grand Central, High Five Escalator, Best Buy, and Food Court Musical. The actions in these videos, which ranged from discreet to highly orchestrated, took place in sites where the ritual of the everyday is in most control—food courts, transit, and retail spaces. All students responded positively, and were excited by the potential.
Two Leash Children are tied to posts while their handlers stop and sit down for a chat.

and sophomores as they walked out of A Building, and a friendly student requested that they sign in and get a number (a photocopy of an actual runner's number) to tape to their chest. As they walked a few paces down the path to B Building, they encountered another table with students cheering them on and passing out little cups of water. At the end of the path, now emblazoned with streamers, another group gave them high fives, took their pictures, and congratulated them. Then they were free to enter B Building as normal. The art students adopted their roles with high enthusiasm and energy, keeping the project engaging and positive. Some of the students passing through this project happily played along, signing in, taking a number, picking up cups of water, smiling and laughing at the people cheering them on. Others watched quizzically or paused to discuss it with their friends. An assistant principal arrived to see what was going on and questioned the girls at the water table, but left with a smile on her face. Aside from a test proctor who complained about excessive noise, everyone who encountered this action responded with good humor. One teacher was overheard saying, "Is this some kind of commentary about the race to graduation?"

The next day, 11 students congregated at a fountain outside a large, crowded shopping mall for the Leash Children project. The students broke into pairs (and one group of three), and one student wore a harness around his or her shoulders while the other carried a leash attached to the harness. The pairs then entered the mall separately, and went about the everyday practice of shopping at the mall. Some pairs simply walked around, others tied their leashed partner to a post while they went in a store, others went for ice cream together, and so on. At first they garnered little response from onlookers, but as the project continued and passersby noticed more leashed pairs, some of the shoppers were more motivated to approach them. When someone asked, "What are you doing?" they replied, "Oh, we're just shopping." When they were asked "Why is s/he on a leash?" they replied, "It's a really big mall," "I don't want to get lost," or "You can never be too safe."

The reactions of the shoppers ranged from confusion to humor to discomfort. As I trailed behind various leashed pairs, I heard confused comments from shoppers, many people stopping to watch or turn around. I asked one seated man, "Did you see that? Why is that girl on a leash?" He replied, "I don't know... Maybe she belongs to her!" I asked the same of the clerk who sold ice cream to a leashed pair, and she replied, "Must be some kind of initiation." Afterwards, the groups shared other reactions with me, such as one pair that went into a popular store to try on clothes. When one student asked an employee to hold the leash while she used the dressing room, the employee vehemently objected. The reactions also seemed to depend on the demographics of the pair. The African-American boy who walked a leashed Hispanic girl received fewer comments from shoppers than the white groups. The group of three, featuring two leashed boys being led by a girl, earned several comments from the boys, such as "It's only gonna get worse, dude, dump her now!" Other shoppers suspected it was a class project of some sort—one group reported several people asking "Is this an Improv Everywhere thing?"
aesthetic and technical choices themselves. Furthermore, as an authentic artistic experience, the projects engaged students in the ideas and processes of contemporary practice in a practical way. When asked to discuss what they hoped to achieve with these projects, students could describe their theoretical and aesthetic goals with clarity and depth, noting the appeal of working with contemporary practices. They also described gaining new understandings of the spaces and people of their everyday lives. One student made a personal connection between the projects and her own experience with public perceptions of sexual identity:

This is maybe weird, or maybe not at all, but in some ways I think the leash project was like gay PDA [Public Displays of Affection] in somewhere where people aren't used to it. Everyone looks, but they don't want you to know they're looking. Some people feel uncomfortable. Some people want you to think that they're basically accepting, but you can tell that they're breaking a sweat. I've never actually experienced that treatment—or been so aware of it—in my lifetime, but I know that I probably will along the road.

These responses reveal a genuine understanding of the postmodern definition of artwork as a participatory, dialogic collaboration between artist and spectator. Furthermore, for any art project to be successful, students must find themselves within it, buying into the project's objective. The buy-in required for this project was exceptional, but students rose to the challenge and found that their bravery was rewarded.

As educators, we look to art projects and reflections like these to assess what our students have learned, but my students provided me with an authentic assessment before any of the public space projects had even begun. When they turned my classroom upside-down, my students were using creative play strategies to transform my space for the sake of fun. Even though we had talked at length about space theory and interventionist practice, and I had shown them a multitude of examples, I do not believe that I taught them to do what they did. Rather, I let them be free to do it. The oppressive atmosphere of school inhibits the

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