

# Art and Resistance in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia 1968-1971: The Implications of Unofficial Art for Subverting High School Art Class

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## ABSTRACT

As art educators strive to promote social justice we may want to invite our students to embrace examples of art and the histories of artists who have resisted the oppressive forces in their respective eras. This article examines the role Czechoslovakian artists have played, and the works they created, in opposition to Soviet occupation in the city of Bratislava in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition to providing a cultural, political, and historical context for interpreting these works, the author advocates for the introduction of works of art that stem from this unique set of circumstances to high school students. The article also uses the discussion of unofficial Czechoslovakian art and artists of Bratislava to examine Conceptual and Performance Art and their implications in deviating from traditional high school art teaching practices.

This study examines the role Slovak conceptual and performance artists have played in opposition to Soviet occupation in the city of Bratislava in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Before I provide a context for examining their works and discuss their merit for the high school classroom, I would like to share how and when my affinity for Slovak art was formed. During the academic years of 1994 and 1995, I was awarded an opportunity to study as an exchange student at the Academy of Fine Arts and Design (AFAD) in Bratislava, Slovakia. After a few months in Bratislava, I attended an exhibition at the Slovak National Gallery that significantly changed my impression of contemporary Slovak art. Hundreds of attendees packed the galleries at the opening reception, and I later discovered that an exhibition of unofficial Slovak art of this magnitude had never before been realized in Bratislava. These works were categorized as unofficial because their content, style, and material were neither supported nor permitted by the communist regime. Through my observation of these works I began to consider the impact of one's political context upon one's artistic production.

I researched the history of Czechoslovakia from Stalinism to the fall of the Soviet Union. From this familiarity with significant historical events, I inquired into individual artists' experiences during the regime. My Slovak professors eventually shared some of their stories of protest, struggle, and perseverance. I began to identify with shared stories of resistance and political agency as they pertained to artists and artmaking. I compared these testimonies to those

African-American artists who persevered despite the challenges they faced in a racially segregated United States during the 1960s.

As a doctoral student in art education, ten years after my first extended visit to the Slovak Republic, I was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to conduct comparative research on African-American art of the Jim Crow era and Slovak art of communist Europe. I conducted archival research both at the AFAD's library and at the Slovak National Gallery. Additionally, in 2003 and 2004, I conducted in-depth interviews with many of my former professors at the AFAD, including David Carsky, Daniel Fischer, Marian Mudroch, and Rudolf Sikora, all of whom were students at the AFAD during the Soviet regime. Through these interviews I discovered that many of my Slovak professors were involved in an underground network of artists known as the "Open Studio." Because of the clandestine nature of their meetings and the subversive content of the resulting artworks, little evidence exists to support that these proceedings ever took place. With the exception of the testimonies I collected, the only known record of these events is the published manuscript of Marian Mudroch entitled *The First Open Studio: The Coming of a New Generation*. Professor Mudroch was kind enough to give me a copy of his book along with a few digital reproductions of old slides from November 19, 1970.

Social interactions where authority and power is questioned or challenged (such as in the events of the Open Studio) typically have political implications. Writing the history of such events is often political as well. Given that several members of the Open Studio came to take the helm of art departments at the AFAD after the fall of the Soviet Union, this history serves to champion a new Slovak artistic vanguard. As historical revisionists often do, when the political climate changed, Mudroch (1994) compiled a history which Slovakia would have never embraced under the previous political conditions. This history could also serve to perpetuate a specific image (a perceived solidarity) of the community of Slovak artists in order to distinguish it from that of its (post 1989) Czech counterpart. Verdery (1999) has noted that national identity is in part, "the individual's sense of self as national, and the identity of the collective whole in relation to others of like kind" (p. 229). In some cases, historians embellish or reorient data into a framework that is most effective in advancing their particular interpretation or theoretical bias. As power changes hands, histories that were previously marginalized become "heroic tales of perseverance." So what was the value of these events in their own time? At the very least, the testimonies and images I collected along with Mudroch's manuscript do support that the Open Studio featured unofficial Czechoslovakian art and provided unique experiences for some of Bratislava's residents during a time when the individual expression



of visual artists was suppressed. The extent to which these events countered the suppression these artists endured under the Soviet Regime is questionable.

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Despite the growing popularity of contemporary arts resources like the PBS video series *Art:21* and educators who design curricula which focuses on works from various cultural and political perspectives, there are still many art histories to be re-discovered (Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon, 2000; Hardy, 2006; Harper, 1998; Lippard, 1990). According to Gaudelius and Speirs (2002), “[s]ocial, political, and cultural issues have become subjects to address in the teaching of art because they create contexts within which we can teach art, interpret art, and make art” (p. 4).

The actions and works produced by Soviet artists during the Cold War emerged out of a unique set of social, cultural, and political circumstances. However, in order to understand these works, it is critical for students to examine their intended purpose, and the conditions these artists endured in creating them (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002). Utilizing these works as teaching tools may expand our students’ world-views and their perspectives on the purpose of the visual arts. This history will hopefully create empathy for the conditions and challenges Czechoslovakian artists faced as they sought platforms from which they could exhibit their work, and opportunities to share and exchange ideas.

Progressive art educators occasionally introduce contemporary artists like Robert Mapplethorpe, Andres Serrano, Damien Hirst, Rene Cox, Chris Ofili or Sarah Lucas (Becker, 1994; Barrett, 1990; Dubin, 1992; Hardy, 2006) into classroom discussions focusing on censorship in the arts, government-funded exhibitions, and freedom of expression. While this is encouraging, it could be equally advantageous for high school art teachers to share the efforts of artists from other political arenas or geographical locations, artists who endured even more severe forms of persecution in their attempts to express and exhibit their works (Ludwig, 2008).

Due to the coerced isolation of artists and art educators in the former Soviet Bloc, the implications of their efforts have attracted little attention from the international academic community or art education practitioners (Garoian, 1994). During the Cold War some of these artists smuggled their works out of the country with hopes that they might make a contribution to the broader international discourse. Other works did not take material form at all, existing primarily as performance and conceptual works (Bartosova, 2008; Mudroch, 1994). Artists whose work was not sanctioned by the Soviet regime partook in a culture of secrecy. Even those museum and center directors who were at the helm of institutions designed to “support art and culture” were compelled

to neglect the documentation of their programmatic efforts in order to sustain their cultural identities (Garoian, 1994). Although it is significant to preserve or reconstruct these stories and events, it is also important to note the significance or metanarrative implied by the ways in which these artists worked.

## PERFORMANCE AND DEMATERIALIZATION

So what were the benefits for Czechoslovakian artists who created works using 'unconventional' and/or subversive modes of expression? And how did the endeavors of performance and conceptual artists in the West compare to those of the former Czechoslovakia? In the West, contemporary artists of the 1960s and 1970s began to challenge conventional notions audiences had about the visual arts and venues at which they were displayed. The performance art that emerged during this period shared affinities with several experimental genres of the early and mid-20th century (Garoian, 1999; Lippard, 1973; Morgan, 1996). Conceptual art came to prominence in the late 1960s and early 1970s as these artists vehemently challenged "the principles of traditional aesthetics as embedded in Greenbergian Modernism, where art functions in relation to the identity of a particular medium" (Morgan, 1996, p. 16). Conceptual artists established the notion that "art is capable of functioning as a language" (Morgan, 1996, p. 16) and that images, objects, process, or medium can function symbolically (De Salvo, 2005; Lippard, 1973). In some cases, the absence or omission of images or objects functions significantly in the work (Morgan, 1996). In addition to exploring concepts through the absence or dematerialization of the art object, conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s had alternative reasons for rejecting the object. Siegelau describes a growing cynicism in the West:

there was an attitude of general distrust toward the object, seen as a necessary finalization of the art-work, and consequently towards its physical existence and market value. There was also the underlying desire and attempt to avoid commercialization of artistic production, a resistance nourished, for the most part, by the historical context: the Vietnam war and subsequent questionings of the American way of life.  
(quoted in Morgan, 1996, p. 21)

While Western conceptual artists rejected conventional uses of the object as a philosophical and political stance against existing power structures in our society including the "art world," Czechoslovakian artists embraced this mode/ method for a variety of reasons.



## DIVERGING AGENDAS: SOCIALISTS REALISM, SOCIAL REALISM, AND ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Unofficial Czechoslovakian artists rejected "Socialist Realism" which supported the Soviet regimes' political agenda, and criticized Western capitalism. These artists looked to the West and embraced styles and methods which challenged that which was officially sanctioned by the regime. In the United States artists were influenced by other political factors. As government officials in the United States recognized the visual arts as a mode of international communication, they hoped it would serve to promote anti-communists ideologies (Mathews, 1976). They opposed the social commentary in representational art and regarded some of the American "Social Realists" of the 1930s as domestically subversive. After the Second World War, Paris had all but lost its esteem as the perceived cultural center of the Western world. Influential art critic Clement Greenberg championed American painters such as Jackson Pollock, as the leaders of the new cultural center, New York City. While the remainder of the West was recovering from WWII, the United States was prospering and began to establish itself as a cultural, economic, and military force (Guilbaut, 1985).

Painters in the United States including: Williem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Mark Rothko subscribed to a new aesthetic which no longer represented the voices and views of the American people. Instead it represented a formal superiority and was supported by the elite and wealthy (Matthew, 1976). With the huge success of Abstract Expressionist painters like Jackson Pollock, many painters who created representational works of social relevance in the 1930s shifted to nonrepresentational abstract painting (Guilbaut, 1985). However the racial climate of the 1960s compelled many African-American artists to continue to employ or shift to figurative representations in order to extend a socially and politically relevant message to their communities (Fine, 1971). Unofficial Czechoslovakian artists in the late 1960s also felt compelled to respond to their political climate. However they faced additional hurdles.

## THE PRAGUE SPRING

Relative to the political climate of other Soviet-ruled nations, Czechoslovakia was seemingly open to the possibility of democratic change in the beginning of 1968. Reform proposals during the "Prague Spring" promoted an environment of hope and promise. According to Gawdiak (1989), "The movement to democratize socialism in Czechoslovakia, formerly confined largely to the party intelligentsia, acquired a new, popular dynamism... The program proposed a 'new model of socialism,' 'profoundly democratic' and 'national,' that is, adapted to Czechoslovak conditions" (p. 62). Although freedom of assembly and expression

were proposed as constitutional laws, this reform movement would nevertheless maintain a commitment to communist goals (Gawdiak, 1989).

In this short period, Czechoslovakian artists experienced unprecedented freedoms and also shared a sense of exceptional enthusiasm (D. Fischer, personal communication, October 26, 2003). They attended international symposia while galleries and museums were beginning to support artistic styles that were previously forbidden under Stalinism. The availability of Western magazines and journals also provided a window to the Western art world. Publications such as *Art in America* and *Art News* were made readily available through the Academy of Fine Art and Design in Bratislava and the Slovak National Gallery's library collections (R. Sikora, personal communication, January 26, 2004). Czechoslovakian artists gained international exposure and experienced freedoms like never before. Rusnakova (2000) wrote:

Information flows sped up, and possibilities to travel, make contacts, and take part in international exhibitions opened up. The artists crossed boundaries of traditional types of art. They created assemblages, objects, environments and concepts. They switched to 'Happenings' and 'Action Art' in which aesthetic aspects gave way to social ones. The trends that originated in 'Duchamp's' family established themselves fairly quickly (Neo-Dada, Pop Art, New Realism and Conceptual Art). Time, space and a change in the viewer's position from that of spectator to that of participant played an important role in the perception of artwork. (p. 214)

According to Rusnakova, by the second half of the 1960s, Czechoslovakian art had "caught up with what it had missed" in previous decades and had "set a course toward a change of a paradigm" (p. 217). On August 21, 1968, the intervention of Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops marked the end of democratic change in Czechoslovakia. For the next 20 years, the country would be under the authority of a foreign power. Ultimately, these events had a profound impact on the cultural and political presence of visual artists in Czechoslovakia.

## OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL ARTISTS

Despite the military success of the troops, the cultural impact of this imposition was not immediately apparent. In 1969, the Slovak National Gallery in Bratislava hosted an exhibition of American art entitled "American Painting after 1945." The exhibition featured influential American painters including Frank Stella, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Roy Lichtenstein, and Andy Warhol (D. Fischer, personal communication, October 26, 2003). As of June of 1970 it was still possible for unofficial artists to display their works on Spa Island in Piestany, where the vanguard of young artists held exhibitions (Rusnakova, 2000). It took a couple of years before the communist regime began to more



proactively censor education, art, and culture. Of course this censorship largely impacted the content and style of the visual arts produced in Czechoslovakia. A program referred to as “normalization”—the restoration of continuity with the pre-reform policies—was initiated. “Normalization” had dramatic effects on the production of visual artists. “Official Art” or “State Art,” which was defined and regulated during Stalinism, was reinstated. Lorand Hegyi (2000) expands on the parameters set forth by the doctrines of Official Art:

They upheld the tradition of Realism and Naturalism...Art was interpreted as an instrument of class conflict; current political issues and moral, educational aspects determined the imagery of “Socialist Realism.” A Communist iconography was adopted as a model, but the contradictions between the two poles of a prescribed Realism—the presentation of truth- and idealization-serving as a tool of moral education...(p. 60)

The visual arts had to adhere to rigid Socialist Realist standards. “Official artists,” who produced Socialist Realist works, were supported by the system through prestigious public commissions, teaching appointments at the academies and universities, and major museum and gallery exhibitions (Mudroch & Toth, 1994; Solomon, 1991; Ludwig, 1998).

Those who produced works outside of that which perpetuated communist ideology were scrutinized, persecuted, and often threatened (D. Fischer, personal communication, October 26, 2003). These so-called “unofficial artists,” subscribed to freedom of expression or personal religious subjects, but were forbidden to produce such works much less teach or exhibit independently without the Czechoslovakian government’s support. Unofficial artists were constantly under the scrutiny of the Ministry of Culture as well as the secret police; they could not travel outside the country or hold teaching positions in higher education (D. Fischer, personal communication, October 26, 2003). Rusnakova (2000) described how these artists “concerned with new tendencies found themselves pushed away from the scene and had to create under tougher financial and material conditions, in insufficient space, within the alternative culture scene” (p. 217). Some unofficial artists found substitute ways to sustain their incomes while avoiding the pressures of the regime. They illustrated children’s books, worked as puppeteers and interior designers, and taught visual arts classes to young children (Mudroch & Toth, 1994; R. Sikora, personal communication, January 26, 2004).

It was not long before underground networks were formed to promote a platform for free-expression for artists and intellectuals. Select Czechoslovakians met in secrecy on a weekly basis to exchange ideas, share information, and to exhibit, and perform. They also discussed issues of identity, politics, art, and culture as it pertained to life beyond the borders of Czechoslovakia and explored

ways to use their collective creative energies to promote social and political awareness. In 1970, Rudolf Sikora, a young Czechoslovakian artist and recent graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, opened his home and courtyard as a common meeting place for underground events. His residence became known to an elite group of poets, musicians, and visual artists as the Open Studio. For the next 19 years, people assembled weekly at Sikora's home to share ideas, to perform, and to exhibit (R. Sikora, personal communication, January 26, 2004). Despite the restrictive circumstances in which they lived, they struggled to survive as professional artists and never compromised their ideologies.

### THE FIRST OPEN STUDIO

November 19, 1970 marked the evening of the "First Open Studio." It was the first deliberate protest against interventions of power on the visual arts in Bratislava. Some 400 people attended this social event, which focused on art and activism that literally and metaphorically addressed the cultural and political condition of Czechoslovakia. Sikora invited 19 artists who created land, action, pop, installation, performance, and conceptual art. The works produced by this generation of Czechoslovakian artists shaped the face of unofficial art for years to come. They developed styles of playfulness, sensitivity to the civil and unorthodox forms and functions of the picture, and a willingness to enter into polemic and confrontation and to take collective risks as collaborators (Mudroch & Toth, 1994).

Although the secret police often suspected that these artists were involved in subversive activities and subjected them to interrogations and threats, there was rarely any physical evidence that these events took place. Many of the works exhibited in this venue left no material trace. One of the major participants in the First Open Studio, Marian Mudroch, who is now a professor in the foundations program at the AFAD, created several collaborative conceptual works. Mudroch created a poignant ceremonial work entitled *Focus Your Attention on the House's Chimneys: By Its Intervention in Civil Atmosphere of a City District Using Colored Smoke*, to kick off the evening's events. During this opening event, Mudroch simultaneously stoked the two chimneys of Sikora's house with colored smoke-producing materials. One chimney yielded red smoke while the other smoked blue. While attendees stood outside and watched, the two colored puffs of smoke took to the sky, serving as a metaphor for recreating an atmosphere for 1970 that was more conducive to creativity and the freeing of social constraints. It was no coincidence that Mudroch used the colors of the Czechoslovakian flag to make his statement about restrictive forces on creative expression (Mudroch & Toth, 1994).



Along with Viliam Jakubik and Julius Koller, Mudroch created additional works which spoke to the cultural and political atmosphere of Czechoslovakia. In a work whose title loosely translates to *Atmosphere of 1970: Unbreathable*, nearly every attendee was given a small can upon arrival, approximately the size of a can of tuna, which read in red, white and blue paint, "Atmosphere of 1970: Unbreathable." Again, this work serves as a metaphor for the restrictive climate of this period. The can could be interpreted as an emergency ration of free oxygen in the event that the conditions of Czechoslovakia became even more unbearable. On a more playful note, the three artists staged a performance called *Czechoslovakia*. Fourteen small cardboard boxes roughly the size of children's blocks, each of which possessed one of the fourteen letters to spell out the name "Czechoslovakia," were placed side by side. After arranging the boxes in an orderly fashion, Jakubik, Koller, and Mudroch then opened each box and took out a small mechanical wind-up toy frog. Each frog was then wound to bounce about hence dismantling the original order of the letters. This playful and direct message was well received (Mudroch & Toth, 1994).

Mudroch was also involved in the production of two additional performances, which commemorated American artists Jackson Pollock and Roy Lichtenstein. *Homage to Lichtenstein* was an indoor performance, which included a beautiful blonde model dressed as the women depicted in Lichtenstein's famous cartoon-like paintings, performing behind a giant polka dot shower curtain which represented the quintessential stippling one also finds in Lichtenstein's paintings.



Fig. 1&2  
Homage to Lichtenstein, by Vladimír Kordiš, Marián  
Mudroch and Viliam Jakubík, 1971

Although she did not speak English, she did exclaim dramatic quotes through her performance that evoked ideas about action and suspense. She also blew soap bubbles, which signified the speech bubbles conventionally used in comic strips and in Lichtenstein's paintings (Mudroch & Toth, 1994).

As was common in other works by Jakubik, Koller, and Mudroch, *Homage to Jackson Pollock* required the participation of the audience. The artists turned over a plot of land in Sikora's yard and neatly leveled it. In a grid-like fashion, rows of two-inch wide holes were spread across the plot at about one-half inch apart. In front of the plot were four different containers, each containing a different color of paint. The initial participants were directed to use a ladle to distribute the paint throughout the composition on the ground. Although it is doubtful that Pollock used a ladle to execute his paintings, participants were encouraged to do so, and expected to stand over the composition as they painted. Because this work was created in the soil it would have been easier to destroy it after the event. These works served to symbolically invite Western artists (i.e. their names, and components of their signature styles) to join with those of the Slovak underground through unique and memorable experiences (Mudroch & Toth, 1994).

While much of the public is still unaware of the history of the Open Studio, the passion with which the participants shared their testimonies indicates that these experiences are permanently etched on their memories. Although I found no evidence to support that the events of the Open Studio had a significant impact on the construction of national identity of Slovak people in general, it did provide a release for an otherwise frustrated and suppressed group of Bratislavas' residents. Scott (1990) asserted that many suppressed groups create cultures outside of oppression whereby they collectively critique domination. These insubordinations register in the memory of the participants and subtly fuel revolutionary vigor. Through these critiques or "off-stage dissents" temporary moments filled with satisfaction, elation, and hope occur (Scott, 1990, p. xi). While the secret police and Ministry of Culture often interrogated, warned, and threatened alleged participants of the Open Studio, it is possible that the Soviet Regime anticipated and tolerated some subversions during the 1970s and 80s. As it compared to physical political uprisings and possible violent protests, were these forms of resistance considered to be less of a potential threat to the national Czechoslovakian identity the regime hoped to maintain? Whether they were permitted or not, these events provided a generation of creative young people with a platform that would not have been tolerated during Stalinism (R. Sikora, personal communication, January 26, 2004). In addition, these collaborations and performances do have implications for the high school art class.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGH SCHOOL ART EDUCATION

Dipti Desai (2002) suggested that during collaboration “artists create a forum for people to assist them in understanding their community’s experiences and use that exchange to naturally guide the direction of the project” (p. 317). Certainly the Open Studio collaborations and performances generated a discourse, which was not typically welcomed in this political climate. Viewing these artists in the context of a high school classroom could urge art teachers to “move beyond the consideration of the physicality of the art object *per se* to a contextualized understanding of the object in terms of the social, political, economic, and cultural condition of production and appreciation” (Desai, 2002, p. 318).

A discussion of unofficial Slovak artists in the high school classroom offers to bring to light the contributions of conceptual and performance artists who employ art as a form of investigation both in the United States and abroad. Along with raising questions equally important for students of the visual arts such as “What shall we make?” or “How shall we compose it?”, new questions become relevant, which use the visual arts not as a means to an end but as a mode of investigation. In lieu of producing objects and images, Morgan (1996) stated: “[Conceptual] artists made it clear that art was primarily a form of investigation” (p. 2). While conceptual art served to challenge the modernist paradigm and possibly gave way to the postmodern discourse, formalism continued to dominate the direction of K-12 art education for years to come (Gaudelius & Speirs, 2002; Stankiewicz, 2001). Perhaps discussing artists of the Open Studio could serve as a point of departure for new assignments, challenges and questions such as: How can we use conceptual or performance art as a means of challenging our cultural or political climate or revisiting our personal or collective histories?

For the past 35 years, performance artist and educator Charles Garoian (1999) has explored the possibilities of performance through his art, teaching, and research. As a high school art teacher, he and his students have worked collaboratively in exploring complex issues through performances. In 1977, Garoian collaborated with several high school students in a performance entitled *Dialogue with an object of conversation*. Garoian (1999) wrote:

my students gagged, hog-tied, and dragged my body before a white package tied with a string, placed on the floor, and illuminated by a mechanic’s “trouble light”. Once I was situated with my head adjacent to the package, a student carefully untied its string, opened its wrapping to expose a large cow’s tongue purchased from the local butcher. With my ability for speech and movement impeded, I began to twist and turn my body, to attempt freedom, to move toward the severed tongue. I repeated these actions while waxing philosophic about the paradox of art, its ability to liberate and obviate expression simultaneously. However, with, my “tongue tied” and gagged, my

commentary consisted of loud nonsense sounds and mumbles that were ironically juxtaposed with the severed tongue on the floor. (p. 7)

The research which emerged from this performance enabled Garoian (1999) to construct lessons through which he and his students could “explore the paradox of language use, to expose and critique its hidden dimensions” (p. 8). By comparison to those high school art teachers who hold steadfastly to the elements and principles and the use of conventional art making materials, surely Garoian offered a transformative experience (Garoian, 1999).

Since those works created by unofficial artists in Czechoslovakia were not typically staged or exhibited in museums, centers, or schools, the Open Studio provided an opportunity for participants to engage in new modes of inquiry, which were also gaining increasing popularity in the West (Lippard, 1973; Morgan, 1996). Just as the often studied Impressionist painters had a shared method for creating works, so too did the Open Studio artists. As much as anything, these works served to “interrupt the flow of normative social experience” (Harper, 1998, p. vii). Harper (1998) suggests that unofficial artists “are more likely to see the social impact of their work as an intervention into the network of normal social relations or a provocation to normative values” (p. vii).

During the civil rights movements, African-American activists took advantage of platforms to challenge the status quo. They staged sit-ins and protests, and attended speeches and marches that imprinted voices of protest and images of Black power in the public memory, in spite of their portrayals in the mainstream media. African-American artists also created images of protest. These actions and works were an overt intervention to the normative social experience of racial oppression in the United States. Freedom fighter and activist Assata Shakur (1987) stated:

The less you think about your oppression, the more your tolerance for it grows. After a while, people just think oppression is the normal state of things. But to become free you have to be acutely aware of being a slave. (p. 188)

In certain social, political, and educational contexts we can arrive at these realizations and combat oppression and conformity collectively. As it pertains to how events shape collective memory, Pennebaker, Paez, and Rime (1997) have noted that “Virtually all events, experiences, and perceptions were shaped by individual’s interactions with others” (p. 4).

As we instill the responsibilities of global citizenship in our students, there are a variety of efforts we can make to acknowledge the historical injustices and atrocities of the world. Such atrocities include African Slavery, The Jewish Holocaust, Apartheid, the bombing of Hiroshima, genocide in Rwanda, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as well as current oppressive circumstances



and conditions. Teachers and students can utilize performance as a vehicle for impressing new metaphors on the public memory of our youth (Sturken, 1999). Just as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s resulted in public protests and critical discourse on the plight of the African-American in the U.S., venues such as the Open Studio gave way to unique opportunities for artists to etch their metaphorical acts of protest in the collective memory of Slovaks who were not aligned with the Communist Party. Pennebaker, Paez, and Rime (1997) advocate that memories are more likely to be recalled if they are unique and provoke emotional reactions, therefore, unique performances and conceptual works are more likely to resonate. Because the creative language with which the Open Studio artists explored and shared was not a familiar one for many of the attendees, these experiences were especially memorable (Pennebaker, Paez, & Rime, 1997). The unfamiliarity and the compelled psychological adaptation forced attendees to challenge the normative Slovak experience. According to Garoian (1999):

Historically and theoretically, the political challenge of performance art has enabled artists to question the assumption of traditional art and culture with respect to contemporary issues that are often considered “subversive,” “controversial,” or “difficult”...It is this critical-thinking dimension of performance art—the desire to experience, question, and respond to contemporary culture and to create culture anew from interdisciplinary and intercultural perspectives—that is significant to a pedagogy of postmodern art education. (p. 19)

High school students can also explore the potential impact of these modes on collective memory, hence creating a new cultural experience in the classroom. Just as art students are required to familiarize themselves with the materials and tools of inquiry for creating under the previous (predominantly Modernist) paradigm, we can allow our students to use those materials and postmodern concepts associated with contemporary art in order to subvert formal instructional platforms and to create their own (Gude, 2004; Hardy, 2006). In the following paragraph I discuss how classroom teachers might utilize postmodern concepts to explore a familiar seasonal school topic; The Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.

The legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. is a topic that is visited annually in many public schools. Every January, elementary school hallways are lined with essays and drawings of King at the podium, and high schools air his famous “I Have a Dream” speech on the P.A system. Yet my experiences in the schools indicate that the collective memory of King perpetuates the idea that he was a man with a dream who was incidentally assassinated. Some children have even asserted that King was killed for having a dream. What role does King’s legacy play in public memory and incidentally in shaping national identity? Do impressions of King somehow better serve the social/political agenda of the United States than would

the legacy of Civil Rights martyr and radical Muslim leader, Malcolm X? A less static performative approach to addressing these legacies might evoke creative interpretations, queries, and more resonating images and experiences. Students can then negotiate the relationship between their personal and collective memories of King. What might a performance exploring King's or Malcolm X's legacies offer to public memory beyond that which traditional school curriculum already have? Learning through performance could potentially challenge the intended impact of King's legacy on public memory and will certainly challenge the traditional role the art class plays in shaping school culture.

Contemporary artists like Charles Garoian, James Luna, and Guillermo Gomez-Pena use performance art to explore a diversity of themes such as pedagogy, language, globalization, colonization, memory and history. The works of these artists could also serve as a point of departure for meaningful investigations. When properly facilitated, even the most fundamental explorations of performance can open up spaces for critical dialogue and reflection that can lead to envisioning social change or other ways of being. Students could revisit issues and re-chart historical events in a way that theater or conventional visual arts education may not allow (Garoian, 1999).

Rather than subscribing to existing historical paradigms that one might pursue through essay writing, School Theater, or documenting historical events and social issues through painting or drawing assignments, students can explore the body as a metaphor and the signification of various objects in its proximity. How might a unique performance or conceptual piece compare to a traditional school play? What impact could this mode have on public memory? Works from the First Open Studio were transformative not because they instilled overt revolutionary vigor in the participants but because they facilitated a critical space where people could create and engage in experiences which deviated from their daily conformity. Perhaps our own students can benefit from a deviation of the conventions of art class, as did Garoian's students. Not only did the events of the First Open Studio serve to subvert the Soviet Regime, but they also subverted the limitations and restrictions that the regime placed on visual arts practices. Art classrooms can also provide liminal experiences wherein participants might experiment with the experience of transformation and subversion itself—playfully, symbolically and metaphysically—which is just another of the languages of contemporary art.



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