

# ART AND SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

Culture as Commons

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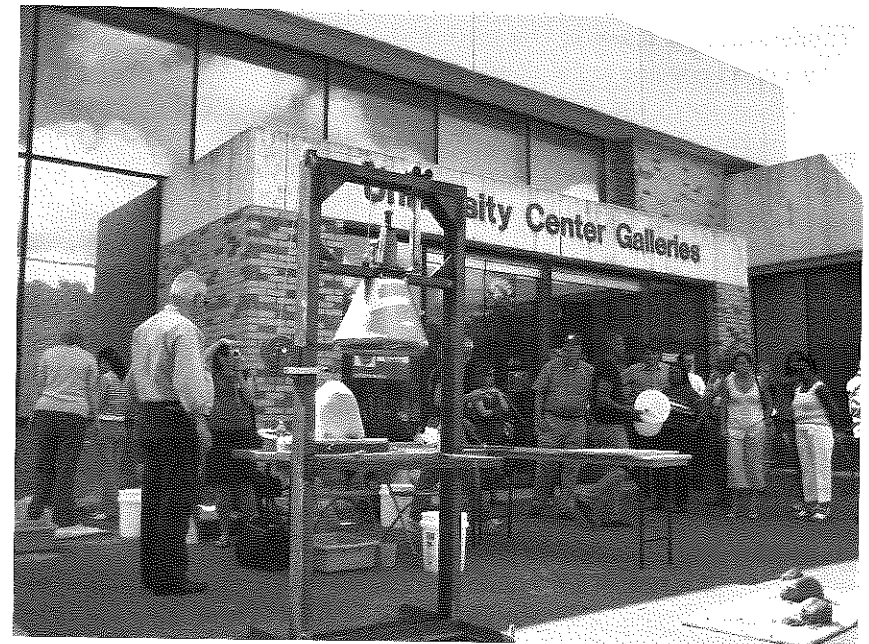
## IN SEARCH OF CLEAN WATER AND CRITICAL ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Collaborative Artistic Responses Through  
the Possibilities of Sustainability and  
Appropriate Technologies

*B. Stephen Carpenter, II and Marissa Muñoz*

Water is life. Worldwide, increasing demand for water by industry and agriculture far exceeds the amount people consume for daily survival. Whereas water was once considered part of a community commons, scarcity has motivated its corporate privatization. Potable water is increasingly available only to those who can afford it, and dangerously unavailable to those who cannot. As a result, a small portion of the world's population can afford the luxury of indoor plumbing and seemingly unlimited supplies of potable water in their homes, while millions of people are left without the means or access to safe drinking water in their communities. In discussing these global water shortages, there seem to be three distinct approaches: water discussed as a legally enforceable universal human right, water as a commoditized resource protected by monetary value in the free market, and water as a grassroots human rights issue addressed through non-formal pedagogy (Muñoz, 2010).

This chapter is a critical conversation between non-hierarchical collaborators. Our conversation models a generative approach to considering possibilities in response to/with/through the contexts of commons. More specifically, this chapter is a dialogic exchange about what educators, artists, and cultural workers can do, and are doing, to engage meaningful and sustainable responses to environmental injustice. Because such an undertaking is quite broad, here we focus specifically on the global water crisis of inequitable and inadequate access to potable water. We draw upon scholarship from various disciplines including sociology,



*Water Filter Production Demonstration as Public Pedagogy. Texas A&M University, 2007*

cultural studies, curriculum studies, visual culture, and the arts as we construct interpretations of, and curriculum possibilities inspired by, the work of artists, educators, activists, and cultural workers. We offer the work of contemporary artists Mel Chin and Natalie Jeremijenko as two examples of individuals whose interdisciplinary artistic efforts for social justice embody the kinds of collaborative responses and public pedagogy we believe should be at the heart of current and future P-16 art and general education.

Steve: For the past few years we have both been concerned with the complexities of balancing scholarship and practical action as sustainable responses to environmental injustice. Our work with point-of-use ceramic water filters is a direct response to the global water crisis, and the subject of much of our work separately and collaboratively (Carpenter, 2010; Carpenter et al., 2009, 2010; Hoyt & Carpenter, 2008; Muñoz, 2010). The filters are porous vessels created from a mixture of local clay, combustible materials, and colloidal silver (a natural antimicrobial that combats waterborne diseases) inspired by the work of Potters for Peace (2010) and FilterPure (2010). Our inspiration came from the hard work of community activists, cultural change agents, and artists whose individual and combined efforts in communities around the world inspired us to respond to similar needs in the Texas border communities along the Rio Grande. Following the philosophy of “appropriate technology” advocated by artist, humanitarian, and water justice colleague Manny Hernandez (2001), we consciously use indigenous materials and resources to create the filters. By using appropriate technologies to keep the production costs low and the manufacture process sustainable; communities are enriched by improved health, quality of life, and the means to ensure continued access to clean drinking water. Our belief that water is a universal human right regardless of economic means has shaped our collaborative work with local residents, and has offered a viable plan for success where other approaches have failed.<sup>1</sup>

Marissa: In choosing to take action, our partnership has generated new extensions and collaborations while enriching the work at multiple levels. From the clay in our hands, to the concepts we communicate, to interpersonal relationships, and community development, each action contributes to the basic human right to clean water. In so doing, we echo Freire’s *conscientization*, or transformative awakening, and grow from passive observers into active agents who create real-world critical interventions (Freire, 1998). This approach encourages learning by doing, responding, interacting, interrupting, and resisting a dominant culture that cultivates passivity, instead, embodying a pedagogy of “critical thinking that refuses to decouple education from democracy, politics from pedagogy, and understanding from public intervention” (Giroux, 2010, p. 492).

Scholars such as Peter Gleick (1999, 2000, 2006) focus on water and explore issues of politics and economics from a conservation perspective, suggesting place-based solutions and environmental justice. Gleick notes,

An estimated 14–30 thousand people, mostly young children and the elderly, die every day from water-related diseases. At any given moment, approximately one half of the people in the developing world suffer from disease caused by drinking contaminated water or eating contaminated food.

(1999, p. 488)

These people are not hypothetical but are real people who live near to where we live, with limited or no access to healthy potable water. When viable and simple solutions exist, remaining passive seems inhumane. Within our common contexts, water justice work embodies a praxis of teaching toward positive change as a critical intervention that directly addresses the reality of water inequality.

Water justice colleague and artist Richard Wukich explains,

If I could teach people how to clean their water and have 10,999 children die a day instead of 11,000, I would feel like I accomplished something. It does not sound like a big statistic, but when it’s your child, [one] becomes significant.

(Reyes, 2006)

While many water studies often focus on statistics, water justice work begins with and centers around people focused on actions to make improvements. The kind of work Wukich and others like him perform is situated at the intersection of critical pedagogy and environmental justice, but creates customized solutions from a place-based, public pedagogy perspective. In order to more clearly describe the struggle toward water equity, I developed the concept of a *praxis of critical environmental justice*. Modeled after eco-justice pedagogy (Bowers, 2002), critical environmental justice facilitates critical interventions to respond to common contexts, based on:

1. **A non-hierarchal approach**, in both internal organizational structure and external community partnership models,
2. **Recognition of indigenous culture and knowledge**, using strength-based and culturally-relevant approaches,
3. **A recovery of the community commons**, including non-commoditized aspects of public health, advocacy, and community empowerment, and

4. **A sustainable ecology for future generations**, nurturing the next generation, and minimizes its ecological footprint.

Steve: This praxis of critical environmental justice seems to function as a framework to assess the kind of work we believe needs to be done. The work of several artists come to mind for me that seem to embody the kind of work outlined through your criteria of critical environmental justice. Specifically, the work of Mel Chin and Natalie Jeremijenko embody these criteria, but there are many others who also fit this description. "Revival Field" by Mel Chin is an environmental installation that takes on the responsibility of ecological restoration through the use of hyperaccumulator plants that treat contaminated soil by removing heavy metals. This work, while evident in all four of your criteria, seems to emphasize the contexts of the recovery of community commons and a sustainable ecology for future generations.

Natalie Jeremijenko's work is situated at the intersections of visual art, public pedagogy, technology, and environmental justice. Her most recent project is an interdisciplinary collaborative called the *xClinic*, an environmental health clinic and lab that provides visitors ("impatients") with prescriptions ("solutions") to respond to specific deficiencies in the environmental health of their communities. In a discussion of her work that includes responses to environmental injustices committed by industry, Jeremijenko asks two key questions: (1) "What is the opportunity for change that new media technologies present?" and (2) "How might we [seize that or] use that to [kind of] build the social change we want?" (*Daily Motion* 2010). These questions, like many of her projects, refer to all four of the criteria of critical environmental justice, but especially those that emphasize non-hierarchical approaches and the recovery of the community commons. Jeremijenko's interest in how technologies can encourage positive social change is a key link to the work of Chin and other artists who move beyond activism and into the realm of action to ensure a sustainable ecology for future generations.<sup>2</sup>

I see the examples of Chin, Jeremijenko, and our water filter work as inspiration for P-16 art and general education curriculum and praxis. In saying that, I am not necessarily suggesting that art and general education curricula mimic them precisely but rather use these examples as conceptual exemplars to serve as motivation for developing and enacting collaborative educational experiences that respond directly to social and environmental injustice. By placing an emphasis on sustainability and appropriate technologies, such curricula require educators and learners to consider all four contexts of critical environmental justice. In short, the contexts of critical environmental justice you outline can be used to inspire rather than prescribe positive change.

Marissa: There seems to be a common urgency to respond, whether for educators, artists, or community advocates. To prescribe would limit the generative possibilities unique to each place and collection of collaborators. However, by centering the learning experience around a collective response to a shared context, learners may experience the empowerment of affecting positive change in their own lives and communities, and in so doing, embody positive social change.

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### Notes

- 1 For more information about our water project visit <http://tamuwaterproject.wordpress.com/>
- 2 For more information about Revival Field visit [www.pbs.org/art21/artists/chin/clip2.html](http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/chin/clip2.html). For more information about xClinic visit [www.environmentalhealthclinic.net/](http://www.environmentalhealthclinic.net/)

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## OPENING SPACES FOR SUBJECTIVITY IN AN URBAN MIDDLE-SCHOOL ART CLASSROOM

### A Dialogue between Theory and Practice

*Carol Culp and Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández*

In this dialogue between two teachers, the authors speak from their particular relationship to art education. Carol is a public middle-school teacher in Toronto and a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). The chapter opens with a short description of Carol's work. This reflection is followed by a response from Rubén, a faculty member at OISE, in which he notes the challenges that Carol's experiences illustrate.

Carol Culp (CC): I teach art in a multi-ethnic, lower-income middle school in Scarborough, Ontario. Over time I became frustrated with my students' focus on being "good" at art and decided to ask students to investigate themselves as a subject. I hoped the students would start thinking about what was important to them without worrying too much about technique. We began with self-portraits. I gave lessons on the proportions of the human face and how to mix and apply acrylic paint. I gave students magazines and asked them to incorporate collage elements. I showed the students traditional, painted portraits from the National Portrait Gallery in London. The resulting projects were fairly predictable—faces looking directly at the viewer, some magazine pictures pasted on top. While the students liked their results, I felt let down. I wished that the students had gone a bit "deeper" and investigated themselves in more "meaningful" ways. I realized I had to stop and examine what I was doing. I had asked students to investigate themselves by looking at images painted by European "masters." I had asked them to create collages of "themselves" using images from mainstream magazines. Who was I investigating, the