

Critical Pedagogy in “Between the Door and the Street”

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Current Issues in Art Education: Critical Pedagogy, Contemporary Art & The
Educational Turn

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The Project

Suzanne Lacy is a social practice artist who is known for her performance pieces, video and photographic installations, critical writing, and public practices in communities. Lacy produced the activist work, “Between the Door to the Street (2013),” over a five month time period, as a performance that involved almost 400 activists. This piece was presented by Creative Time and the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. After a series of preparatory work between Lacy, the activists, and an advisory board, the piece culminated as a discussion forum presented on 60 stoops in Park Place, Brooklyn. 2500 people gathered to listen to these in-depth conversations of the 400 activists taking place on stoops, regarding issues facing women today. Participants were marked by yellow scarves and resembled an incredible diversity, as well as a willingness to use discussion as a “symbolic gesture,” as a part of Suzanne Lacy’s vision (Lacy, 2014). These compelling conversations about gender, race, ethnicity and class, were unscripted, yet prompted by questions of Lacy and the participants. Together, participants who were physically between doors and streets, became a performance-based social practice work conducted by Suzanne Lacy.

What is Critical Pedagogy?

Suzanne Lacy’s work can be dissected as an artwork, but also as an educational tool. Her work is considered a social practice artwork because it involves public participation. Furthermore, this social practice work has themes of education and specifically evokes the educational framework, critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire, is a leading theorist for the educational philosophy, critical pedagogy, and author of “Pedagogy of the Oppressed.” Freire has a global impact regarding his theory of critical pedagogy, which has sparked the minds of educators and

tenets of progressive education. In this text, Freire poses the question: “How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?”

(Freire, 1972, pp. 48). To this question, he responds with “Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” a text that seeks to inform and invigorate humans toward the “process of achieving freedom” through critical pedagogy (Freire, 1972, pp. 49).

But what is critical pedagogy? There are several tenets vital to critical pedagogy, as an educational philosophy and framework. Freire is an advocate for knowledge construction through dialogue, which is an essential component of critical pedagogy. He writes:

If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity. And since dialogue is the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized, this dialogue cannot be reproduced to the act of one person’s “depositing” ideas in another, nor can it become a simple exchange of ideas to be “consumed” by the discussants (Freire, 1972, pp. 88-89)

This type of learning, known as knowledge construction, is different than the traditional model of education. The traditional model, what Freire refers to as “depositing” or the “banking concept of education,” is the scope in which students can only extend as far as the information they are receiving from the teacher (Freire, 1972, pp. 72). On the contrary, Freire seeks “problem-posing” in education, where students respond to ideas provided by the teacher through discussion, with intentionality (Freire, 1972, pp. 79). Patricia Hinchey regards the banking method as “positivist” epistemology in education, and compares it to “constructivist” epistemology: “The constructivist teacher doesn’t believe knowledge is something she possess...the task of the constructivist

teacher is to design experiences that will give students an opportunity to develop their own understanding of the data at hand” (Hinchey, 2010, pp. 42). This is exactly what Suzanne Lacy is doing in her piece, “Between the Door and the Street.” She creates an environment for her participants to discuss predetermined questions to build knowledge around the issues surrounding women. She could have created a stagnant artwork that responds to women’s issues, but instead she organized a social practice work. This form of art, social practice, uses conversation as the art form, rather than art itself. Lacy’s artwork constructs knowledge around and brings attention to feminism, through discussion. This dialogue is a crucial part of Lacy’s work, and a prominent feature of critical pedagogy.

We still have not identified the most important theme of critical pedagogy. Without it, we are just thinking critically, not pedagogically. “Critical pedagogy is interested in the margins of society, the experiences and needs of the individuals faced with oppression and marginalization,” (Kincheloe, 2008, pp. 23). Joe Kincheloe is a critical pedagogy activist and writer, who advocates for critical pedagogy in education. Like Freire, he believes in the force against oppression. He sees critical pedagogy as an educational tool that is “interested in maintaining a delicate balance between social change and cultivating the intellect—developing a rigorous education in a hostile environment that accomplishes both goals” (Kincheloe, 2008, pp. 21). Social change and critical pedagogy go hand-in-hand. It is only when we acknowledge and dissect power structures, that we can seek social change. This is essential to critical pedagogy. Artists and/or educators instill critical pedagogical practices to promote awareness and transformation of social structures. In education, students who practice critical pedagogy through curriculum experience real-world contexts and discuss situations to become change agents. In Suzanne Lacy’s artwork, participants are the collaborative learners enacting themes of critical

pedagogy. They insert their opinions into a male-dominated society to create awareness around the idea of feminism, and promote transformation of society to expel women’s oppression. Joe Kincheloe states that “critical pedagogy is dedicated to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power. Advocates of critical pedagogy work to expose and then contest oppressive forms of power as expressed in socioeconomic class elitism, Eurocentric ways of viewing the world, patriarchal oppression, and imperialism around the world” (Kincheloe, 2008, pp. 34).

The participants in Lacy’s piece are outwardly identifying societal flaws. This relates to the concept, “naming,” which Freire brings up in the above text when he says “people, by naming the world, transform it” (Freire, 1972, pp.88). “Naming” is another component of critical pedagogy, and is the notion of acknowledging themes or ideas found in the world in order to dissect them. These ideas usually embrace controversial components of society and power dynamics, including racism, classism, and women’s rights. It is important to name power structures to actively analyze them and promote change. In Lacy’s work, she is provoking participants to discuss what is hidden or unspoken in society by naming power structures. In turn, the participants are being culturally and socially responsive to these power structures, through their participation in the artwork, and by conversing with other citizens. By naming power structures, dissecting them through discussion, and working towards social change, participants are involved in critical pedagogy.

Cultural and social responsiveness is another theme of critical pedagogy. Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk compare critical thinking and critical pedagogy in their text, “Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences and Limits.” They believe that thinking critically is recognizing faulty arguments, whereas thinking pedagogically is recognizing social injustice. They state:

Critical pedagogy regards specific belief claims... as parts of systems of belief and action that have aggregate effects within the power structures of society. It asks first about the systems of belief and action, *who benefits?* The primary preoccupation of critical pedagogy is with social injustice and how to transform inequitable, or oppressive institutions and social relations (Burbueles and Berk, 1990, pp. 47).

Transforming these inequitable social relations and oppressive institutions is the act of being socially responsive. Suzanne Lacy sparked this process by questioning *who benefits?* By asking this question she is naming power structures and identifying women as the oppressed. She then not only responded to social injustice through her art, but the participants responded as well by proclaiming their opinions, anecdotes, and conversations to the public.

Critical pedagogy is also grounded in lived experience. Learners can only build knowledge based on previously established mental constructs, therefore it is necessary they bring personal experiences to the conversation. “Because you’re a girl, you can cry,” a participant shared as she recollected telling her father that she was queer. “But I embrace both genders,” she responded passionately. One participant discussed issues of domestic violence: “It’s because their issue is not anger management, it’s power, it’s control, it’s coercion.” “Talk to me like I’m your daughter or your sister or your mother, don’t talk to me like I’m your next meal,” a participant begged our male-dominated society. Another participant asked her group, “How do we bring to light the feminization of poverty?” (Lacy, 2014). These remarks are just some of the many shared between the door and the street during Suzanne Lacy’s performance-based social practice piece. These quotes represent voices who are first-hand witnesses to issues surrounding women. They bring their experiences to their conversations to share and further explore these issues. John Dewey, a renowned educational reformer, focused primarily on progressive

education. His at one time “newer philosophy” is based on the idea that “there is an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1998, pp. 20). Dewey’s progressive education instills that lived experience contributes to building knowledge in an interactive environment. Instead of presenting objective material, the material should be introduced “not as so much new subject-matter, but as showing the factors already involved in previous experience as furnishing tools by which that experience can be more easily and effectively regulated” (Dewey, 1897, pp. 7). He believes that there is “an intimate and necessary relation between the processes of actual experience and education” (Dewey, 1998, pp. 20). As Dewey suggests, participants in Lacy’s piece are utilizing their previous experiences to build knowledge. Even though Dewey’s vision of progressive education takes place in the classroom, artists are utilizing these principles in their social practice artworks.

The Educational Turn: From Critical Pedagogy to Public Pedagogy

This brings us to the transformation of critical pedagogy from the classroom to the public, known as the educational turn, or “transpedagogy.” This term was coined by Pablo Helguera, and describes projects by artists and collectives that “blend educational processes and art making in ways that are clearly different from the more conventional functions of art academies and other varieties of formal art education” (Helguera, 2011, pp. 99). These contemporary forms of art include social practice, and Suzanne Lacy’s “Between the Door and the Street.” Her unconventional work is an experience, or performance, rather than a visual work. Instead of creating a visual art piece that is meant to be interpreted, transpedagogy uses pedagogy as the core of the artwork, so that collective interpretations arise through dialogue. (Helguera, 2011, pp. 100). Transpedagogy is enacted through conversations, and activism in the

public. Learners are not just students, they are participants of the artwork and members of society. Through careful consideration of discourse, we now know that Suzanne Lacy’s piece is not only an artwork, but a public practice of critical pedagogy, or transpedagogy. Claire Bishop, critiques the notion of pedagogic art projects, and sees this reorientation as a motion toward “relational” practice of “discursive situations with high-level intellectual content” (Bishop, 2012, pp. 245). This could even be considered “useful art” (Bishop, 2012, pp. 249), a foreign concept to many conventional thinkers of society. Henry Giroux takes this idea even further by naming it *public pedagogy*. He states that “Pedagogical relationships exist wherever knowledge is produced, highlighting how conflicts over meaning, language, and representation become symptomatic of a larger struggle over cultural authority, the role of intellectuals and artists, and the meaning of democratic public life” (Giroux Artist, 1995, pp. 8). In public pedagogy, public space acts as a classroom for dissecting relationships among culture. This practice of pedagogy is beyond formal schooling, and directly responds to issues facing the public, just as it would respond to issues facing students in a classroom.

Let’s take a step back to analyze specific features of Suzanne Lacy’s work, “Between the Door and the Street.” In public pedagogy, the artist teaches the public ways of achieving social justice. Suzanne Lacy did not simply invite activists on the day of the performance, she spent six months in conversation with a diverse group of women that responded to the criticisms of feminism to provide awareness of these issues affecting women of all backgrounds (e-flux, 2013). Working with a diverse group of intellects and activists allowed Suzanne Lacy to develop specific content for the project over time. This inclusivity of various perspectives orients the artist in a position to administer the artwork from a vantage point that teaches the public ways of achieving social justice. However, She does not insert knowledge, she directs it. Here, the public

is learning from the artist and vice versa. The stoops become a stage for social awareness that spreads beyond the street, and ideally to dominant oppressors of society.

Empowering individuals as change agents

Women shouldn't just “walk the roads” of oppression, but rather they should stand up for their place in society (Horton and Freire, 1990). Both Myles Horton and Paulo Freire believe in a vision of “participatory education as a crucible for empowerment of the poor and powerless” (Horton and Freire, 1990, pp. xv). Critical pedagogy, both in the classroom and the public, acts as a tool for empowering individuals as change agents for the betterment of society. The curriculum of art and of education should yield an opportunity for students and citizens to imagine alternate realities and possibilities of change. Critical pedagogy and public pedagogy enables students and citizens to not only be visionaries, but also activists. This combines the notions of theory and practice, otherwise known as “praxis” (Freire, 1972, pp. 32). As change agents, individuals are involved in the “pedagogy of their liberation” (Freire, 1972, pp. 48)

Conclusion

Suzanne Lacy's social practice artwork, “Between the Door and the Street,” directly aligns with themes of critical pedagogy and public pedagogy. Her work uses dialogue to construct knowledge around feminism in a collaborative, participatory environment. These conversations are grounded in lived experiences, and the work itself includes audience participation from the speakers and listening passersby. The work is culturally and socially responsive in that it dissects social structures of gender, class, sex and power, while naming these social structures. This work poses problems, by the artist herself and by the participants, which

then communicates these problems to the rest of society. Because this is a social practice artwork evoking the educational framework of critical pedagogy, the work can be considered a notion of transpedagogy, or public pedagogy. Suzanne Lacy’s work, “Between the Door and the Street,” is a work of critical and public pedagogy that orients the participants as visionaries and activists, in that they use real-world contexts to face the future as change agents.

Resources

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