

The Art of Social Justice

Maria X. Martinez

“The purpose is to show the working class that art and artists are not strangers to it; that some artists faithfully fight beside them...trying always to put their creative capacity at the service of the people. Thus, the workers can also realize that art is a career and a social activity that is useful, and not the idle pastime that the bourgeois philosophers pretend it is. The artists and the workers will understand that the artist can be a useful collaborator with whom it can acquire an effective, solid, and permanent collaboration.”

Leopoldo Méndez (1902-1969) El Taller de Grafica Popular, Mexico

Staring directly at the Northern Ireland checkpoint, briefcase in hand about to be opened, Chilean political refugee René Castro poised himself for a battle. British soldiers drew their rifles immediately and ordered him to halt. “What’s in the case?” they demanded. “My weapon,” he answered. Their rifles cocked as he opened the case and withdrew his sketchbook.

I first heard this story over 15 years ago while volunteering at the Mission Cultural Center in San Francisco. I was a healthcare administrator, having spent my entire career trying to improve systems

Figure 2: Rhodessa Jones. Photo: Lorraine Capparell, © Cultural Odyssey, reprinted by permission.

In the mid-1970’s, San Francisco artist Rhodessa Jones did a ground-breaking performance piece called “The Legend of Lily Overstreet” about an African American woman who worked in a peep show downtown. Over the course of its lengthy run, in the basement of a church, “Lily Overstreet” built bridges that crossed the great divide between predominately white feminists and women of color. For the last 16 years, her story-telling and performance workshops with incarcerated women, the Medea Project, has proven so artistically successful and socially effective that it has been replicated in communities around the globe.



that treated disease and injuries. Using art as an agent for social change was a perspective I had never studied in art history classes and the image in my mind of the soldiers’ startled faces opened a lens for me that has never closed. That same summer, the Mission District was in the height of gang violence. Kids were killing kids...19 of them so far and the prospects for peace were not hopeful. We dedicated the Day of the Dead Procession that year to the youth who had fallen. Hundreds of people walked down 24th Street to Garfield Park where artists wrapped their poems, dances, and music around the community and the families of lost children to affirm our young people and to help them heal. No healthcare system I had ever improved came close to reaching that many people, that deeply.

Artists not only document social change; they promote, inform, and shape it. Whether through music, plays, graphics, paintings, songs, films, media, architecture, textiles, jewelry, photography, poetry, sculpture, pottery, landscapes, written word, spoken word, dance – art is powerful. And it is San Francisco’s greatest, most cost-effective *missed* opportunity. For art is the intellectual underpinning of social change; nowhere is there more potential and more need for art than here and now.



Figure 1: Allen Ginsberg. Photo by Francisco J. Dominguez, reprinted with his permission.

During the 50’s, Allen Ginsberg, the openly gay beat poet, challenged through his poetry the government’s right to dictate what people could read, what they could say in public, and with whom they could sleep. His words laid the foundation for defeating censorship and helped birth the gay political movement in San Francisco.

Maria X Martinez (631 Andover Street, San Francisco, California 94110; maria.x.martinez@sfdph.org) is Deputy Director of Community Programs for the San Francisco Department of Public Health. She is a longtime advocate of building community through the arts, and – from the bottom of her heart – would like to thank the many artists of San Francisco whose generosity, creativity, and dedication to social justice inspire her daily.

The social dilemmas facing our nation are great: the war, the chipping away of civil rights, the Christian Right, the persistent criminalization of immigrants, growing disparities in economic and educational status, rising rates of violence, obesity, chronic alcoholism, depression and youth suicides, and louder and louder are the groans from our neglected, abused, and increasingly pissed-off Mother Earth.

The health effects of social inequality and poverty are catastrophic. International studies now show that the average U.S. resident is much sicker than his or her European counterpart (WHO, 2000) a fact likely explained cumulatively by overwork, stress, limited social spending, segregation of opportunity and the lack of social connectedness and safety nets. People on the lower end of the social ladder bear the greatest costs, running at least twice the risk of injury, chronic illness, and premature death than people near the top (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2003). The disparity is most profound in poor and segregated neighborhoods where children can expect to live decades fewer than their more affluent counterparts (Geronimus et al., 2001).

San Francisco has the second highest rate of children's out-of-home placement into foster care of all California counties (CDSS, 2006). The prevalence of disease and injuries and the years of



Figure 4: Patrick Makuakane. Photo by Julie Mau, reprinted with her permission.

Patrick Makuakane learned the art of hula at age 13 during the 1970's cultural renaissance in Hawaii when aging elders ignited a cultural reclamation that included a surge of male dancers joining the female dominated dance groups. In 1985, he founded the San Francisco dance troupe Na Lei Hulu I Ka Wekiu ("the many feathered wreaths at the summit, held in high esteem") and - through hula - teaches the movement, music, art, language, history, and chants of his people to hundreds of pupils and audiences every year. The beauty and power of the hula amazes and awes, but Makuakane believes that culture is a lifeline to our ancestors...only with it do we understand who we are and where we are going.

avoidable life lost in San Francisco will depend upon which community you belong to. Living in seven low-income areas of San Francisco are those with the highest use of mental health services, the lion's share of criminal justice placements, the densest number of welfare enrollees, and the fastest rising incidence of gun violence (Kelly, 2005). Homicide is the number one cause of lost years of life for males in San Francisco's Bayview Hunters Point (Aragon, Reiter, and Katcher, 1999).

Dr. Rajiv Bhatia, Director of Environmental Health in San Francisco, believes that the only way forward is to see that we are all in this together. In a conversation with me, Dr. Bhatia explained: Health disparities, in fact, all social disparities, are maintained by walls and boundaries that make it all too easy not to see or hear our brothers and sisters. We come to believe that those who are socially excluded are somehow responsible for their status, and we don't recognize that, at least over generations, we will all share the same fates. Public health is now trying to bridge this divide by providing scientific proof that social inequities are the causes of avoidable health impacts, and we hope that others will follow

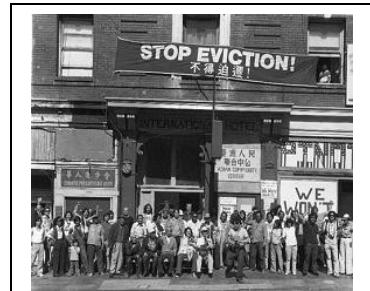


Figure 3: The International Hotel. Photo by Chris Huei, reprinted with his permission.

In 1972, Lora Foo and artists Jim Dong and Mike Chin started the first San Francisco Asian American arts organization, the Kearny Street Workshop, to serve the Manilatown and Chinatown communities. On behalf of mostly elderly Filipino and Chinese tenants who were fighting a battle against eviction at the International Hotel, artists protested alongside tenants and other advocates to become the cultural arm of the struggle by silk-screening protest posters, painting murals on the I-Hotel, and producing exhibitions and publications. To this date, Curtis Choy's film, the "Fall of the I-Hotel," is shown throughout schools and colleges across the country. Poet Al Robles, a part of the I-Hotel struggle since the beginning, remains active with the new I-Hotel which reopened in 2005. Nancy Hom curates arts programs at the new Manilatown Center on the ground floor of the I-Hotel.

through with policies and laws, but until we connect to each other and *feel* the injustice of unnecessary suffering, change will not happen.”

Such health disparities are both unjust and avoidable. Understanding the root causes of social injustice and realizing one’s power to affect the conditions it creates are necessary for healing and key to preventing them in the first place. Interventions aimed at the social factors that influence health and well-being have the greatest potential for long-term impact (Rose, 2001).

So, what role can art play? The purpose of community art is to engage participation. Art rooted in neighborhoods mirrors, activates, stimulates, educates, agitates, delights, promotes,

Figure 5: Ester Hernandez, Sun Mad. © 1981, Ester Hernandez, reprinted with her permission.

Growing up in the San Joaquin Valley, San Francisco artist Ester Hernandez watched her mother boil the water drawn from the pesticide-contaminated wells to make it safe for her family to drink, while friends and family working in the grape fields were being diagnosed with cancer at an alarming rate. Viewing a large billboard promoting Sun Maid Raisins and their “naturalness,” Hernandez denounced the lie and created her now-internationally-known poster “Sun Mad.” While posters from the farm worker’s movement brought light to the plight of the workers themselves, “Sun Mad” effectively brought a consumer’s perspective to the overuse of pesticides and its effects on humans and the environment. Created in 1981, the “Sun Mad” image is used around the world and remains a powerful education tool.



prevents, provides options, intervenes, inspires, transforms, crosses cultures, honors traditions, unites, entertains, and heals – in safe, accessible, and relevant ways. The gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” is often central in the San Francisco political debate, but it veils the deep mistrust between and within oppressed communities. Artists with experience working cross-culturally can break down barriers between communities, dispel ignorance and fear, and build trust.

Art also gets the point across. Anti-gentrification advocates spent years trying to get out their message about the displacement of people of color in San Francisco, but only after hundreds of artists marched down Mission Street with their faces painted white did the global mass media pay attention. Advertising companies also know the powerful of art. They effectively use it to entice us to spend the money we often do not have.

With such great potential, why are San Francisco’s priorities for public funding of the arts so disconnected from its public initiatives designed to address the social, economic, and the health disparities of its communities? A mere two percent of San Francisco’s general public funds goes to the arts, and two-thirds of that goes to nine large organizations that predominantly serve those whose patrons stand on the winning-side of the disparity line¹. I sit at government tables where public initiatives are being developed and funded to address violence prevention, neighborhood beautification and

revitalization, after-school programming, behavioral health promotion, community building, disease and injury prevention, and economic development. Yet at those tables, the arts community is glaringly absent. If we presume that many of our communities and neighborhoods are at risk, that art is an effective change agent, and that public funds imply public service, then would not directing public funds to community artists who serve to build and vitalize our neighborhoods be a wise investment?

An effective way for that to occur would be for San Francisco to employ community artists for extended periods of time using the 1930’s WPA (Work Progress Administration) model (Adams and Goldbard, 1995):

- Artists would be competitively-selected based upon their need for employment, their artistic capabilities, and their professional abilities to partner with community-based organizations.

- Artists would work hand-in-hand with those developing citywide, cross-departmental, and grass-roots initiatives aimed at creating positive change.
- Projects would expand the range of how we encounter art by moving art out of buildings and reserved seats and into the fabric of the neighborhoods to encourage participation.
- San Franciscans would have available – within walking distance of where they live and work – safe, quality, affordable, accessible, and culturally-relevant art.
- Artists would share in the development of, and recognition and responsibility for, outcomes.

The idea of utilizing San Francisco’s most creative capital to promote social justice, mitigate disparities, and build healthy neighborhoods is an exciting one, but one that will require bold leadership from elected officials and the arts community itself. To achieve it will require a sustained investment of public funds to integrate individual artists into communities where they are needed the most. Juana Alicia (2006), whose award-winning artwork can be found in neighborhoods throughout San Francisco (see Figure 6), shared these insights from her experience as a public artist:

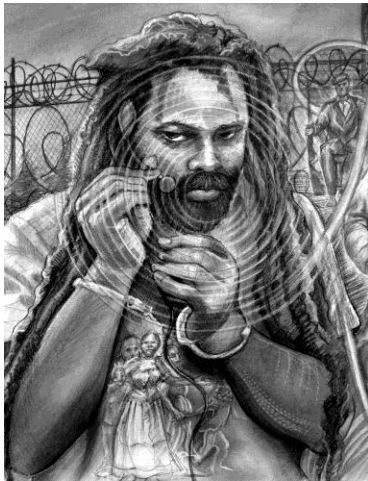


Figure 6: Juana Alicia, “Mumia: Listening to the Ancestors, Connecting the Living, Live from Death Row” Preliminary Drawing, © 2006 World Rights Reserved, reprinted with her permission.

The joy of creating art that celebrates social justice defies privatization: it reaffirms the public square and the human circle by bringing beauty and intellectual debate within those spaces. Whether I am creating a work on healing and diversity for an urban medical center, or a mural that celebrates the flowering of human development in elders, or collaborating with a team of artists to celebrate the women’s contributions to the world, I am working to bring the interior life of the community to the fabric of our architecture and environment, to promote a dialogue between members of diverse communities.”

NOTE

¹ Calculation is based upon dividing the General Fund portion of the City and County of San Francisco’s FY0506 allocated to the arts (\$48,396,020) by the Total General Fund (\$2,453,294,411) (CCSF, 2006).

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