Five Dialogues on Dialogue-Based Public Art Projects

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In the introduction, I discussed how Clement Greenberg decreed that art exists in its own aesthetic realm, separated from the world of politics or other social interactions. The thinkers and practitioners in this section could not be farther from this notion of aesthetic purity and isolation. They embrace the notion of dialogue, of sharing power and creating through a process of social interaction.

As a counterpoint to the Greenbergian notion of aesthetic isolation, I start this section with an interview with Paulo Freire (1927–1997), an influential activist and educational theorist from Brazil. Freire's philosophy (which I summarize in an expanded introduction to his interview) has tremendous appeal for me in a discussion of public art for several reasons. It seems relevant to mention that I first heard about Freire in the mid-1980s from artists who were involved in public action. I learned what a dialogue-based approach could mean by experiencing their art projects—and later learned about Freire's philosophy of dialogue; I progressed from practice to theory.

Translations of Paulo Freire's work have been available in the United States since the early 1970s, including *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,*[1] *Pedagogy of the City,*[2] and *Pedagogy of Hope.*[3] Reading these three books convinced me that Freire is a philosopher whose theories are firmly based on action and experience, whose activism is infused with theory. When I interviewed Freire in São Paulo, Brazil, where he lived, I was inspired with his open-mindedness, the continuing evolution of his approach, and the relevance of his notion of dialogue to public art practice. In the interview, Freire discusses the nature of dialogue and how his ideas intersect with art. Freire, even in less-than-perfect health, was lucid and energetic in his discussion. True to his philosophy, he was intent on listening as well as presenting his own point of view.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles has been working in collaboration or in dialogue with the New York City Department of Sanitation since the late 1970s. In her interview, Ukeles discusses how she went from a graduate student in fine arts, to a young mother looking after her baby, to a professional artist working on a day-to-day basis at the Department of Sanitation. The interview traces Ukeles's work from her early maintenance art projects, to her manifestoes, to her early projects in collaboration with sanitation workers.

In creating *Alien Staff,* Krzysztof Wodiczko has collaborated with a series of immigrants to the United States and other countries, often undocumented workers. For example, working together, Wodiczko and Jagoda Przybylak designed an instrument with which she could tell her story of immigration in the city. The staff includes

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a series of transparent compartments that hold small objects that Przybylak felt were important in telling her story. At the top of the staff, there is a video monitor that plays a tape of Przybylak relating a series of emblematic stories regarding immigration. On a number of occasions in New York and in Houston, Przybylak has taken this instrument out into the city and used it as a device to interact with strangers, to stimulate discussion on the issues of immigration. There are several levels of dialogue: the staff is created through a dialogical process between Wodiczko and Przybylak, and it is meant to stimulate discussion and debate. When it is being operated in the city, it is an instrument for dialogue.

The first interview is with Jagoda Przybylak, a woman who, like Wodiczko, grew up in Poland and emigrated to the United States. As opposed to Assata Shakur (interviewed in Part II), Przybylak was not helped out of economic hardship by the art project. By the time she collaborated with Wodiczko, Przybylak was certainly "on her feet" in the United States, teaching photography and showing her work. The *Alien Staff* had a different sort of effect on her, helping her to come to terms with and make public her early experiences as an undocumented worker, when she was employed as a companion to an elderly woman and as a cleaning woman in New York's financial district. It is also interesting to note that Przybylak credits *Alien Staff* with opening up a dialogue between herself and Wodiczko regarding their immigrant experience. It has a public role, but it functions in a very intimate way as well, revealing personal stories.

The interview with Wodiczko is more theoretical. He discusses his philosophical motivations for *Alien Staff,* and how it relates to other projects, including his well-known projections. He discusses the psychological nature of *Alien Staff,* how it acts as a sort of public/political psychotherapy. In the United States, Wodiczko has run into resistance to *Alien Staff,* because of the general perception that immigrants are welcome here, and that suffering is simply an acceptable part of the experience. But immigration is changing the face of America in a way that makes some people uncomfortable; opening up the experiences of immigrants to public view is desirable to counter the increasing hostility. *Alien Staff* is an instrument developed to create dialogue in the tradition, I believe, of Paulo Freire.

In the introduction, I discussed the development of Battery Park City. At the north end of the development is a New York City public school, Stuyvesant High School. Stuyvesant was founded in 1908 and operated on the same site on the east side of Manhattan until moving to Battery Park City in 1992. Under New York's Per-

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cent for Art law, the school was required to spend 1 percent of the construction costs on permanent public art, and Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel were awarded the commission. In Paulo Freire's educational technique, prospective educators first spend a great deal of time in the community, develop their educational materials in dialogue with the community, and create a mechanism for ongoing dialogue. Without any direct knowledge of Freire (as far as I know), Jones and Ginzel created a very Freirian project—spending time at the old Stuyvesant High School, creating a project with thousands of current and former students, and making an on-going project for the members of the school community over an eighty-eight year period into the future.

One of my great regrets is that I was not able to complete this book before Paulo Freire passed away. I would have loved to discuss it with him, to hear his criticism. Freire was inspiring in his openness, his ability to listen to criticism, and to continue to move forward intellectually. He insisted that education, learning, and social change were a process, not a goal. This emphasis on process is also evident in the projects in this section.

Notes

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970). Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos.

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the City* (New York: Continuum, 1993). Translated by Donaldo Macedo.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1992). Translated by Robert R. Barr, with notes by Ana Maria Araujo Freire.

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Interview:
Paulo Freire: *Discussing Dialogue*

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Introduction

Paulo Freire was born in Recife, Brazil, in 1921. He received a law degree from the Universidad Federal de Pernambuco, but never practiced as a lawyer. Instead, Freire chose a career in education, first outlining his philosophy of education in his doctoral dissertation at the University of Recife in 1959, and as professor of the history and philosophy of education at the same school. He was the first director of the Cultural Extension Service of the Universidad de Recife. Freire, a well-known leftist, was jailed for seventy days by the military government that seized power in Brazil in 1964 and "encouraged" to leave the country. This led to fifteen years of exile, in which he worked in Chile, taught briefly at Harvard University, and joined the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Freire passed away at the age of seventy-five on May 3, 1997.[1]

Freire is best known for *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,*[2] a book that outlines his approach to education and liberation. He came from a middle-class family, but the Great Depression hit Brazil as it did the United States, and the severe poverty he experienced as a child influenced his later writing and action. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* written in exile and completed in 1970,[3] is both a political/philosophical treatise and a description of the educational methods that Freire developed in working with adult illiterates. Because his philosophy seems so relevant to the projects described in Part III and there is some unique terminology in Freire's philosophy, I will provide an expanded introduction.

Freire was never content with the goals of traditional education. Rather, he developed an educational approach that sought to teach critical consciousness, learn from students, redefine the power relations between teacher and student, promote dialogue across the economic, political, and educational lines that divide society, and inspire action on the part of the underclass. He saw the roots of oppression not only in illiteracy and poverty, but also in a "culture of silence" among the oppressed. His educational goals do not center on a single problem, but approach the larger social arena within which the problems exist.

Pedagogy of the Oppressed begins with a discussion of the relationship between the "oppressor" and the "oppressed." While these categories might seem a bit too clearly drawn, it is important to remember the context within which the book was written. First, Freire was writing in the late 1960s, a time when political lines seemed clearer than they do today. But "oppression" is a word that still comes to mind when one visits Brazil, where the divisions between the lots of the rich and the poor are so

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extreme, where the two classes are so physically proximate and unmediated by a large middle class. Glittering high-rise buildings abut directly on the *favellas,* slums in which living conditions are almost incomprehensible to people from the United States. The oppressor and the oppressed, however, are not separate in Freire's view. The power of the oppressor is evident in the oppressed people's acceptance of their lower status. Freire says, "Self-deprecation is a characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them."[4] In the classroom, this makes it difficult to open a dialogue, the essential goal of Freire's educational approach, because the (oppressed) students are waiting for the teacher to assume the mantle of authority, to pose the questions and supply the answers. Freire states the problem thus:

A careful analysis of the teacher-student relationship at any level inside or outside school, reveals its fundamentally narrative *character. This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, listening Objects (the students). The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified . . . Education thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.*[5]

This dialectic can be applied to the artist-audience relationship. In the context of the museum (the equivalent of the school), artists, through their work, often take on the role of moral/intellectual/aesthetic teachers, while the audience takes on the role of the passive student. And in the narrative structure of the museum, artwork can become "lifeless and petrified," dead in the mausoleum. Of course this does not need to be the case. When it is not, it is because the viewer takes on an active and critical position in viewing the work—a position for the viewer that is only occasionally encouraged in the structure of the contemporary museum.

Against this model, Freire suggests the "problem-posing" model of education, which is based upon mutual communication rather than a one-way transmission of information:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the

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students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.[6]

We might call the art discussed in Part III problem-posing art, which is created jointly by the artist and the audience. For Freire the process of problem-posing education is creative. If problem-posing dialogue is the essential technique of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* critical thinking is the goal. "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation."[7]

It is worth looking at the specific techniques that Freire developed for his literacy program, because they reveal the depth of interaction to which he was committed. Freire's notion of dialogue did not involve a couple of "community meetings," as it seems to for some public artists and bureaucrats. Rather, it involved a flexible and intense series of collaborative interactions over a protracted period. Here is how Freire describes his educational process in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (including the key words that Freire used to describe his work). A given project would begin with a team of investigators researching the area within which they planned to initiate an educational program. After reviewing secondary sources, the investigators made contact with people from the area and organized a meeting to talk over their objectives, ask for their blessing to proceed on the project, and seek participation in the investigation. Freire does not say whether people ever rejected the investigators' request to work in their area, but it seems unlikely that anyone would turn away a literacy program.[8] After gaining local support, the investigators called for volunteers to help in the process of investigation, and subsequently included the volunteers in the team meetings. Team members then made a series of visits to a variety of sites in the area, including homes, schools, and churches, and individually recorded everything they saw and heard.

The next stage consisted of a series of evaluation meetings, in which the investigators reported their findings and through discussion began to consider the "nuclei of contradiction" within the community. These contradictions are the basic questions, the "meaningful thematics" of the area (usually centering on social issues of one kind or another). After coming to some preliminary conclusions regarding the nuclei of contradiction, the investigators researched the awareness of these themes for the local people. Then, acting as a team, the investigators selected some of these

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contradictions to be developed into "codifications" (sketches or photographs), which would be the basis for the discussions that would follow. The sketches and photographs were designed to be neither too explicit nor too obscure, so that they might open issues up, to stimulate dialogue when they were used in group meetings. When the codifications were completed, the participants analyzed them to understand the process. Then the group returned to initiate dialogue about the codifications in "thematic investigation circles" of up to twenty local residents along with a psychologist and a sociologist. These meetings were taped for subsequent analysis. This "decodification"[9] process was not simply listening to the local response to the images, but also a chance for the investigators to challenge the local residents, posing problems. Once the decodification meetings were completed, the investigators undertook a systematic interdisciplinary study of their findings. Finally, the team prepared the materials—what we might call "teacher packets" in a museum education program—which would be used for the educational project in the area.

This thoroughly dialogical process was meant to be the *starting point* for dialogue: "With all the didactic material prepared . . . the team of educators is ready to represent to the people their own thematics, in systematized and amplified form. The thematics which have come from the people return to them—not as contents to be deposited, but as problems to be solved."[10] The aim of Freire's educational program was to stimulate critical consciousness, help the local residents to gain understanding of the political, social, and economic conditions they lived within, and by taking their input seriously, to help increase their self-confidence. Freire insists that the process must be true to its philosophical underpinnings. While Marshall McLuhan says that the medium is the message, Freire might say that the process is the product (or conversely, the product is the process). If liberation is the goal of the educational program, then the design of the educational program itself should be one of dialogue and power-sharing. One can imagine the education that the investigators received in creating their educational materials.

Some have argued that Freire's philosophy is essentially powerless because it is based upon a transformation in consciousness as opposed to a transformation in social institutions. bell hooks is one of Freire's strongest advocates. In *Teaching to Transgress* (certainly a Freirian title), she addresses the objection that creating critical consciousness falls short:

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Many times people will say to me that I seem to be suggesting that it is enough for individuals to change how they think. And you see, even their use of the enough *tells us something about the attitude they bring to this question. It has a patronizing sound, one that does not convey any heartfelt understanding of how a change in attitude (though not a completion of any transformative process) can be significant for colonized/oppressed people. Again and again Freire has had to remind readers that he never spoke of conscientization[11] as an end itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis.[12]*

Stanley Aronowitz has said that the basic point for Freire is not to create a new *technique* for teaching, but to "offer a system in which the locus of the learning process is shifted from the teacher to the student. And this shift overtly signifies an altered *power* relationship, not only in the classroom but in the broader social canvas as well."[13] Aronowitz goes on:

The teacher-intellectual becomes the vehicle for liberation only by advancing a pedagogy that decisively transfers control of the educational enterprise from her or himself *as subject to the subaltern student. The mediation between the dependent present and the independent future is dialogic education.[14]*

One of the basic criticisms of Freire's work is that it still depends on the teacher, the presumably middle-class, educated leader, who will open the minds of "the people" for their benefit, whether they like it or not. This objection has been leveled against dialogue-based art as well, and it is a difficult objection to overcome. In a 1996 review of the Three Rivers Art Festival, Miwon Kwon cited the risk of projects that claim to be created through an interactive process with non-artists. She says:

With return plane tickets in their back pockets, artists enter "communities" as outside experts to mediate between the daily lives of underprivileged social groups and Art. In turn, these "communities," identified as targets for collaborations in which its members will perform as subjects and co-producers of their own appropriation, are often conceived of to be ready-made and fixed entities rather than as fluid and multiple.[15]

Kwon is critiquing the "community art" in which the nonartist participants are little more than a new sort of material to be manipulated. And she is right: interactive art can be manipulative. As Kwon points out, there is nothing inherently good about col-

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laborating with an audience. If one is to collaborate, it needs to be done with caution and respect. Just like traditional public art that is thrust upon the local residents, superficially conceived community projects could qualify as "cultural invasion" in Freire's terminology. "In cultural invasion," Freire writes, "the actors . . . superimpose themselves on the people, who are assigned the role of spectators, of objects. In cultural synthesis, the actors become integrated with the people, who are coauthors of the action that both perform upon the world."[16]

Kwon's argument posits a weak and naive "community" and an artist who has not entered into a complete dialogue in Freire's sense. But the "underprivileged" people to whom Kwon refers often have their own personal or political goals that they hope to accomplish in collaborating with artists. In addition, the artists whom I put forth here as examples of dialogue-based art have worked together with their "community collaborators" for extended periods. They do not have "return plane tickets in their back pockets," but dedicate years, if not decades, to their collaborations.

Dialogue-based art or education is a balancing act between "cultural invasion" on the one hand and mere reflections of popular values on the other hand. If one believes that "the oppressed" have something to offer, shouldn't the "people's voice" be unmediated by any input from the outside? By the time Freire published *Pedagogy of the City* (in the early 1990s) he had been asked about the balance between the teacher-student and the student-teacher repeatedly. His response reflects the approach he outlined in the last part of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* though (as Aronowitz points out) it lacks the revolutionary rhetoric:

To be with the community, to work with the community, does not necessitate the construction of the community as the proprietor of truth and virtue. To be and work with the community means to respect its members, learn from them so one can teach them as well. . . . The mistake with the sectarian community-based program does not lie in the valorization of the people of the community, but in making them the only repositories of truth and virtue. The mistake does not lie in the criticism, negation, or rejection of academic intellectuals who are arrogant theorists, but in rejecting theory itself, the need for rigor and intellectual seriousness.[17]

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The teacher-student and the students-teachers enter a process of dialogue, to which all contribute. To construct *only* the "community as the proprietor of truth and virtue" ignores the contribution of the teacher-student.

Freire's emphasis on process and transformation is relevant to the art discussed in this section of the book, an art in which process and product are one. This is essentially different from traditional works that are created out of sight of the audience—finished and stable, created for the autonomous, permanent, unchanging context of the museum. Just as Freire questions education that seeks to transmit a set of immutable facts from teacher to student, the artists discussed in this section question the one-way communication between artist and audience, and create art through a problem-posing process.

In recent years, there has been increasing discussion of the notion that *all* communication is dialogical. Invoking Bakhtin, theorists, including Rosalind Krauss and Johanne Lamoureaux, argue that meaning is constructed *between* the speaker and listener, rather than simply given.[18] Certainly it is easy to see how the meaning of *Tilted Arc* was constructed between Serra and his various audiences. From the moment it was sited on Federal Plaza, its meaning was in flux, constructed and reconstructed by a series of different audiences in an intense contest for the authority to fix the meaning. If all communication is dialogical, all art is dialogue-based. But it is a matter of degree. The artists interviewed in this section are dedicated to an ongoing process of dialogue. They acknowledge dialogue and accept the instability of meaning as an integral and *desirable* element in the ongoing creation of their work. It is this approach that allows for a critical art that is not based in conflict. When an artist embraces dialogue and sets out to create a process that involves sharing power, this can reorient the process.

Freire's approach is based on a series of ethical decisions. If oppression is wrong, then one must develop a way to fight it that is as sound in its process as it is in its goals. Dialogue is not a means to an end, but a process, an ongoing project of intersubjective investigation.

Of course, public art does not need to be created through a dialogical process. I am presenting this process as a particularly fruitful strategy *among others.* For example, the works discussed earlier by Vito Acconci, Linnea Glatt, Michael Singer, and Maya Lin were not designed through dialogue, although they have all created sites for dialogue. And as Freire points out in the following interview, *any* work of art can be situated in a problem-posing context. He states, for example, that one can in-

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terrogate the notion of beauty in a still-life painting and discuss how "beauty" is distributed in our social system. Freire's approach, then, is not only relevant to work that is created through dialogue, but also to the way all art is presented and consumed.

Freire's work is hopeful because it offers us not a goal but a process, and it is achievable. We *can* initiate a dialogue, even if we cannot immediately dismantle the oppressive institutions that constitute contemporary politics. The sort of dialogue that Freire advocates can be carried out on a small scale, out of the spotlight, across lines of division. Paulo Freire named one of his books *Pedagogy of Hope,* and therein argued that dialogue-based action depends on *critical hope.* He says, "I am hopeful not out of mere stubbornness, but out of existential, concrete imperative."[19]

I was once told that in turn-of-the-century Vienna it was common practice in the Jewish community for people to go over to a friend or relative's home, lie down on a couch, and discuss their problems at some length. The story goes, then, that Freud was simply adapting an everyday mode in the structure he designed for psychoanalysis. I was reminded of this story in visiting Brazil and Paulo Freire. Brazil is a place where human contact is simply more highly valued than it is in the United States. Freire himself is also a person who clearly enjoyed interpersonal dialogue. Though he complained about it good-naturedly, he related how university students were always coming to interview him, and how he always agreed. When I first went to meet him, he was too exhausted to conduct a formal interview, but he offered me coffee, and we chatted for around a half-hour. He was eager to talk about the United States, particularly the trials of O. J. Simpson and Mike Tyson, which he analyzed in terms of class and race. When I left, I thought that Freire's philosophy was a true extension of his cultural and personal circumstances. A great conversationalist, he is the great advocate of dialogue. My gratification in meeting Freire and seeing how true to his philosophy he was mirrored the experience of bell hooks. In her book *Teaching to Transgress* she writes, "When I first encountered Paulo Freire, I was eager to see if his style of teaching would embody the pedagogical practices he described so eloquently in his work. During the short time I studied with him, I was deeply moved by his presence, by the way in which his manner of teaching exemplified his pedagogical theory. (Not all students interested in Freire have had a similar experience.) My experience with him restored my faith in liberatory education."

Note: This interview was conducted in May 1996. I sent the interview to Freire for revisions. However, I received a letter back form his office several months later say-

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ing that Freire was not able to make revisions, and asking that this be noted upon its publication.

Tom Finkelpearl: In the United States the influence of Pedagogy of the Oppressed *and your other books is very broad, not just in education. However, since the practical techniques you discuss relate to an educational process, there can be problems with the translation of these notions of dialogue into other fields. Have you had this sort of experience?*

Paolo Freire: Yes, yes. I think that the only possibility for one not to have this kind of experience is not to produce and think. The moment you make proposals, you risk both understanding and misunderstanding, distortion and respect. For example, personally, one of the great problems I had in the '70s was the misunderstanding of the concept of "conscientization."[20] *If you ask me, "Paulo, what should be done in such a situation?" I answer that I think that the author who perceives that he or she is being distorted cannot commit suicide, but has the duty to make it less easy to be distorted. How? By becoming clearer, more explicit, by discussing the propositions with more rigor in order to help people, including ourselves, understand. I'm sure, though, that the comprehension of a text is not only a task to be accomplished by those who write the text. That is, the readers also have to produce the product, the comprehension of the text.*

TF: So the reader is in dialogue with the writer.

PF: And because of that I think that the writers must be clear concerning the task they have in writing. For example, in the seventies I perceived the distortion in the "conscientization." It seemed that people were saying, at that time, that it was a kind of aspirin. You went to the pharmacy and you bought 50 aspirins, 10 aspirins, 3 aspirins, depending on the quantity of reactionary ideology. For a very reactionary person, you would need, I suppose, 100 aspirins. [laughs] Pills of conscientization. I began to fight against that, trying to make it more clear what I was meaning by conscientization. Today I think that is not a problem.

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I am not sure whether I was able to explain to you how to struggle against the possibility of misunderstandings that provoke bad use of your proposals. For me, there is no solution. The answer is not to be angry, but to be morally more clear. Sometimes the distortion is innocent, sometimes it is preestablished, it is programmed. In any case, we have the duty to clarify.

TF: The sort of distortion I am talking about, for example, relates to artists who go into a neighborhood to set up a "dialogue" and report back to their peers, without ever really leaving room for the people to speak for themselves. People employ the rhetoric of dialogue, but it's a false dialogue. For example, what if I went to an African American community to create a "dialogue," but I knew beforehand what I want the results to be?

PF: Yes, it is absolutely false. But look, I don't want to say that I am prevented from knowing what I would like to say before going there. Because, as a person, I am a project. If I am a project, it means that I have objectives, because if I did not have some objectives and some ends that I am fighting for, I could not be a project. And it is part of my project to conceptualize what kind of arguments I can use in order, for example, to work against racism. For me, this is legitimate. What is not legitimate is to try to impose on them precisely the arguments I thought of beforehand. It is not legitimate, because a true conversation cannot be preestablished. I cannot know beforehand what you will say to me in answering my question. I have to become engaged in order to follow our process of conversation. Do you see? Of course, I have to program my conversation. Nevertheless, I have to know that my conversation cannot be precisely as I planned it.

TF: When I came here today, and I have my questions . . .

PF: Yes. You have your questions, and you have anticipated a way of answering your questions. But these are not necessarily my answers.

TF: You talk about the "nuclei of contradiction" in Pedagogy of the Oppressed: *getting to these essential questions for a community.*[21] *Some artists, I believe, working in their studio, with no dialogical process, have the ability to reach these "nuclei of*

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contradiction" intuitively, almost. They create images that are very valuable to everybody else, that help us ask questions and create dialogue, without themselves being in a dialogue. I've noticed that your house is filled with art. Do you have a feeling about the artist's ability to help us ask questions?

PF: Oh yes. In the last analysis, the artist, in the silence and intimacy of his or her studio, creates scenes like these. [Gesturing to paintings in his living room] First of all, even when the artist is not interested in making a "protest art," still, the artist cannot escape from the social dimension of his or her existence. In many respects, when the artist creates, the artist is projecting, in his or her work, the social influence, the political influence, the ideological influence with which the artist lives. It is social and not only individual, no matter if the artist is working alone. The artist is a social being. There are possibilities of different readings of the production of the artist. Nevertheless, it is possible that all of us find some nucleus, and this nucleus in the artist's production, is the reflection of the social condition.

Of course, sometimes that is the intention of the artist. For example, this piece here [walks over to a small framed painting] was made by the former minister of education of Brazil. In 1963, when he was minister, he invited me to come to Brasilia to organize the campaign for adult literacy in the country. Maybe twenty years ago, he became an artist. He made this work for me. This represents Brasilia. For him Brasilia is something that is rising up, in a transcendental direction. And here, stenciled on the painting is the word tijolo, which means "break" in English. [The word itself is broken into three parts on the canvas: ti jo lo.] It was the first generative word[22] we used in Brasilia, because Brasilia was a city being constructed from nothing, so tijolo was a very strong, generative word for the literacy program. It was a very present word. This is the artist's vision: Brasilia, the future, the dream, the Utopia. It is Brasilia wanting to be something. The artist has all the right to put his or her imagination to work, to transcend the concrete. And, in any case, we can discuss the imagery. For example, we can use this work of the artist as a codification.[23] I can show this work to a group of workers, and we can discuss that.

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TF: So the artist's work may or may not intend to make a social statement, but his or her work can open discussion. But one of the things that we discussed the other day [in a previous, unrecorded discussion] related to social class. A problem that we have with art, is that it is associated with the upper class, while public art relates mostly to places that are used by the lower classes.

PF: I've not had concrete experience in this area, but I think that it is not difficult to understand the possible difference of appreciation and the reaction to projects of public art according to different classes. What I think, nevertheless, is that without wanting to reduce the artists, without trying to instrumentalize the artists, we can use their production independently of their intentions. This still-life painting [pointing to another painting on his wall] is by a very famous Brazilian artist. We could discuss this with a group of workers. Of course, the discussion, a priori, would lead us to aesthetic dimensions of the work—that is, to the question of beauty. But in discussing beauty, you can easily discuss ethical questions, because of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. In discussing ethics and aesthetics, you discuss politics. For example, you can discuss the right to beauty, the right the poor people have to be beautiful, to have beauties, to create beauties. Nevertheless, the poor people have been prevented from getting beauty. What does it mean? Why? Then you can discuss politics, organization of society, of the state, and so on.

TF: I have a friend who is an artist who said that he felt the most radical thing that he could do was to plant trees in the communities where there are no trees, to give some living beauty to the people in that community, to give them a sense of hope, the living presence of the tree. To take care of a tree, to help it live, to help it grow in a community is a transparent metaphor for life.

PF: Yes, yes, yes. Planting a tree can be also a creative and artistic job. Undoubtedly, the very movement of the body in order to make the hole—there is ritual, there is harmony, there is contradiction in this. The very process of planting is very interesting; in some aspects it is a violent process also. By making a hole, we are interfering in the nature of the being of the earth. Nevertheless, we can discuss the beauty of the objectives. This is also an artistic job.

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TF: There is an artist at the Sanitation Department in New York City, and one of her performances involved following sanitation workers on their normal trip around the city to understand the movements that they had to go through, to understand the beauty of their ballet of picking up garbage. She learned their dance, their skill.

PF: This is beautiful. When I was a child in Recife, there was a profession: the men whose job was to move pianos from one house to another. I will never forget how they did the job. It, too, was a ballet. I am sure that, from the point of view of physics and mathematics, we could make calculations to explain how they divided the weight of the object through the different movements of the body in order to put the piano on the heads of each one, and also how to continue to divide the weight by ritual of the walking and singing.

TF: They sang?

PF: Yeah. Fantastically. I am very sorry because we have lost that profession.

TF: I am sure they sang to synchronize their movements. That sounds very beautiful, the sort of beauty that artists can investigate.

I would like to ask you about the issue of cultural difference. I've been in Brazil now for a week, and I've noticed a completely different relationship with time and with space. Everybody is constantly touching one another, and then time . . . is later. You meet someone at maybe, around a certain time of day.

PF: Yes, [laughs] maybe we meet around a certain time. And remember, you are in the center, the most modernized city of the country. If you go to North East Brazil, a professor in the university there tells you, " We'll meet tomorrow at ten o'clock." Well, maybe it's twelve. In São Paulo, we have lots of punctuality, comparatively. [laughs]

TF: With all these differences, what about the translation of ideas, understanding across time and space. You lived in the United States for a while during your exile?

PF: I lived in 1969, in Cambridge, Mass., for a year.

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TF: You found those differences?

PF: Yes, yes. But, first of all, I am very curious about cultural programming. I am always open to the difference. One of my convictions is that we learn, above all, when confronting difference. What is important is to be different, and to respect the difference. I am always convinced, for example, that there are sides of a behavior, sides of a discourse, sides of a sign, which we are not seeing clearly, and that culture explains this. Because of that, I always try to learn. For example, I remember that one time I was in Chile in the beginning of my exile and I needed to resolve questions of my documents, so I went to a public office, but no one looked at me. And then, after a while, I gestured like this [waving toward himself]. A man came to me, very angry, and said "I am not a dog to be called like you did." I said, "Look, I am very sorry but I am a Brazilian." And he said "You must know that you are in Santiago." I said "Of course, I know I am in Santiago, I am just trying to tell you that I was not being offensive. I was ignorant, and now I have learned and I will never will do that again." When I left, I said to myself, "The man is right and wrong." When I told him that I am a Brazilian, I was not being arrogant. On the contrary, I was trying to explain my mistake, my error. I remember also that one day when my daughters were adolescent, they were protesting, making very harsh criticisms of the Chilean way of life. I said, "No, no. You are wrong. The Brazilians are not good or bad, because they are Brazilians. The Chileans also, the Americans also. Look, my daughters, we people are not, we are becoming." Culturally becoming. Historically becoming. Then the question for us, when we come into a strange space, is to begin to learn how we can try to become in the strange space: how the natives are being, what are the social tastes, the way of smiling, the reason why people smile. Humor is very difficult. Sometimes, in the States, I understand the English, but not the language of humor. It does not touch me. It is cultural. But I have discovered possibilities of reinventing myself in the States. I continue to be myself, I am very Brazilian. In my way of speaking, my taste for food, and so on, I am very, very Latin. But I also have good relationships with the public in the States. I create words in English, not just Portuguese. But somehow, people are smiling, understanding me.

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TF: I would like to ask you about theory and practice. In your life, you have gone out to teach literacy, back into the study, out into government to run the school system in São Paulo, and back to the study. In a way, that is like an artist going into his or her studio and back out "into the world." Can you comment on that?

PF: I think that this question of the relationships between action and reflection, thinking and doing, practice and theory will always be a very important question for us. We became historical beings. We became social beings. We became beings programmed for learning and then for teaching, and because of that, we became beings of memory. We became beings of interfering, or for interfering. That is, we are called upon to change the world and not to establish it, not to stop it, or immobilize it. Because of that, it is impossible for us to separate thinking and acting, as if they were two different things. The contradictory unity of it is so strong that by telling you I am a theorist, I am telling you I am a practician, and vice versa. What I want to avoid is to say that we have different times—one for acting, the other one for thinking. It does not exist. What nevertheless exists is that we have preponderant-action time, preponderant-reflection time, but we always are inserted into both action and reflection.

The existence of any action without evaluation is impossible. That is, the evaluation of the action implies moments of reflection upon action. The evaluation process is very theoretical. When we get distance for evaluating, we are theorizing the action. It is impossible to separate, to consider two different things. Maybe we have two different moments inside of just one—of making theory and making action, making practice.

TF: So, what we are doing right now is both.

PF: Yes.

TF: We are reflecting, but this reflection is a part of our practice, and we are also engaging in a process which will be a public manifestation, in a book, which will be published. People will have it in their home, in a library, in their moment of reflection/action. So our reflections and their public manifestation will result in other reflections which can become a part of the practice of the readers.

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PF: Yes, and I remember now a fantastic morning I spent more than ten years ago with an artist in Chicago. We were visiting the murals of Chicago. Fantastic. Afterwards, he gave me a book with the murals. In one part of the book, reference is made to my ideas of codification. Because the painters on the walls of churches, and everything, are painting, exactly, the people of the community. A text in São Paulo was a part of a mural in Chicago.

Notes

1. Information from: http://www.irn.pdx.edu/kerlinb/hotsite/Paulo_Freire.html

2. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970). Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos.

3. From Richard Shaull's foreword to Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.*

4. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* p. 45.

5. Ibid., pp. 52–53.

6. Ibid., p. 61.

7. Ibid., p. 65.

8. At the Percent for Art Program, we instituted a policy where we would ask local community leaders to "sign off" prior to initiating a public art project in their community. Almost without exception they agreed. When a question is asked, and under what circumstances is, of course, key to the answer that will be given.

9. As Ann Berthoff has pointed out to me, there is a difference between decoding and decodification. She says, "Paulo Freire differentiates decoding—matching of graphic sign and sound—and decodification, interpretation, meaning making." She says that Freire and I. A. Richards are the only pedagogues that she knows of who make this differentiation. (From a letter Berthoff sent me, July 1998.)

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10. Ibid., p.104.

11. The neologism "conscientization" is the central term in Freire's activist pedagogical philosophy. In the 1993 edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* the translator, presumably with Freire's consent, says that the word, "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality." (p. 17)

12. bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 47.

13. Stanley Aronowitz, *Dead artists Live theories* (New York: Routledge, 1994). See the essay "Paulo Freire's Radical Democratic Humanism," p. 219.

14. Aronowitz, *Dead artists,* p. 229.

15. Miwon Kwon, "The Three Rivers Art Festival," in *Documents,* Number 7, Fall 1996, p. 31.

16. Ibid., p. 161.

17. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the City* (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 130–132.

18. Johanne Lamoureaux, "Questioning the Public: Addressing the Response," in *Queues, Rendezvous Riots,* ed. George Baird and Mark Lewis (Banff: The Banff Center for the Arts, 1994), p. 150.

19. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Continuum, 1994), p. 8.

20. As noted above, the translator of the 1993 edition of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* says that "conscientization" "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality," p. 17.

21. As outlined in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire's literacy program consists of a number of steps. After a team has been assembled, investigators observe the area where the literacy program will take place, under a variety of circumstances. As these investigative teams (who are both outsiders and locals) meet to discuss their observations, they come up with the "nucleii of contradiction" that will produce "meaningful thematics" for the interaction with people who enter the literacy program. These are developed into "codifications" (see footnote 4).

22. "Generative words" are words that are used in the literacy initiatives to generate meaningful dialogue.

23. After identifying the "nucleii of contradiction," the investigative team selects contradictions to develop as "codifications." These codifications are sketches, photographs, objects, or even sounds. They represent situations that are familiar to the community. As described in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* they are meant to be not too explicit, yet not too obscure. The former would verge on propaganda, while the latter becomes a puzzle or a guessing game. These codifications are analyzed in "thematic investigation circles" and later used in wider "culture circles."

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