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Commentary

Art Education in Civil Society

Elizabeth Delacruz

In the wake of September 11, 2001, the *Journal of Cultural Research in Art Education* devoted a special issue to the potential of art to foster world peace. Throughout that special issue art educators were unified in their belief that art education can make a difference in an increasingly complex, interconnected world. Lewis Lankford asked that art teachers become more self-conscious about incorporating the development of humaneness into their curricula (2002). In Lankford's view, to be humane is to demonstrate kindness, tolerance, and compassion. Building on her work with Melanie Davenport, Enid Zimmerman argued that art education needs to establish links between local communities, national concerns, and international issues (2002). Similarly, in a 2004 special issue of *Visual Arts Research* devoted to diverse populations, Doug Blandy and Julia Kellman emphasized the need to broaden approaches to art education in order to address the economic, social, psychological, technological, and public health problems of globalization. Blandy and Kellman saw engagement with the arts as essential to having an informed and reflective citizenry. In his commentary for *Visual Arts Research*, Blandy continued a thesis that he and Kristin Congdon developed nearly two decades ago, that art education should foster democratic notions (1987). Arguing that educational institutions should be places where young people and adults learn about and make meaningful connections to the material culture, stories, and experiences of others, Blandy established a link between art education and civil society (2004).

The idea that art education should foster civil society merits further consideration. This commentary examines contemporary writings about civil society, and adds to Blandy's discussion of the concept in relation to goals for art education.

What is Civil Society?

Civil society is a notion with a long history. Varying conceptions about civil society have been set forth in the writings of Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, Carl Schmitt, John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Alexis de Tocqueville, Parker Palmer, Robert Putnam, and Edward Said (to name only a few). Over the last 200 years, philosophers and political scientists have used the term *civil society* to designate those elements and social arrangements between people and society that exist outside the state's reach or instigation. In many of those writings "the state" meant European monarchies, or oppressive communist, fascist, and totalitarian regimes (Geremek, 1998). In recent writings, civil society often refers to civil rights alliances that challenge both repressive governments worldwide and corrupt trans-national corporations (Boyte, 2002; Rieff, 1999), although much broader definitions also abound. Civil society is conceptualized in contemporary discourse as "that sphere of voluntary associations and informal networks in which individuals and groups engage in activities of public consequence, and includes widely varying kinds of voluntary associations: churches, neighborhood organizations, cooperatives,

fraternal and sororal organizations, charities, unions, parties, social movements, and interest groups" (Sirianni & Friedland, n. d.). Broad definitions may also include hospitals, schools, governmental agencies, and the family among institutions contributing to civil society, although some writers argue that the term civil society is inappropriately used to refer to all not-for-profit, non-governmental, third sector¹ organizations (such as non-profit service providers and industry associations) (Korten, 2000). Helmut Anheier, editor of the new *Journal of Civil Society* concludes "civil society is a contested concept, with little agreement on its precise meaning" (2005, para.1). Despite varying and contradictory definitions, values underlying notions of civil society cohere around related political and social concerns: honesty, fairness, transparency, safeguarding public health and security (Bryun, 2005); inclusiveness, social justice, and sustainability (Korten, 2000); democracy and citizen empowerment (Boyte, 2002; Bridges, 2002b); and a critical examination of the nature and impact of globalization (Anheier, 2005). Extrapolating from these discussions and from Blandy's 2004 commentary in *Visual Arts Research*, a succinct, operational, and inclusive definition of civil society may be offered here as *that realm of private voluntary associations and public agencies or institutions working toward the public good*. Writing for the Civic Practices Network, Henry Boyte² summarizes elements of a contemporary, vitalized civil society.

I am convinced that we need bold, savvy, and above all political citizens and civic institutions if we are to tame a technological, manipulative state, to transform an increasingly materialistic and competitive culture, and to address effectively the mounting practical challenges of a turbulent and interconnected world. Political citizens require, in turn, a politics that is based on the assumption of plurality, widely owned by citizens, and productive. (2002, para 1)

Co-opted by both liberal and conservative political parties within the United

States, notions of civil society have been framed in public discourse either as an antidote to eroding public trust in government, schools, commerce, and religion, or as a necessary step toward ending the so-called welfare state and a return of the development of civic virtues and moral responsibilities to individuals, families, and communities (Miller, 1999). Responding to efforts to transfer the responsibilities of the social welfare of the citizens of a country from the government to volunteers and community groups, journalist and author David Rieff warns of what he sees as a post-cold war era of "privatization of democracy building" (1999, para. 2). Such transference, in Rieff's view, is tantamount to saying, "Let's give up on the state's ability to establish the rule of law or democracy through elections and legislation, and instead give civic associations—the political equivalent of the private sector—a chance to do their thing" (1999, para. 2). Boyte argues that what is left out of discussions of citizenship from both the left and the right is "the concept of the citizen as a creative, intelligent, and, above all, 'political' agent in the deepest meaning of the word, political—someone able to negotiate diverse views and interests for the sake of accomplishing some public task" (2002, para. 10).

Is Civil Society Declining in the United States?

Social critics have observed an erosion of civil society in the United States, brought about by the expansion of governmental and corporate control and influence in private life, a narrowing of the voluntary sector to service and advocacy (Sirianni & Friedland, n. d.), the ascendance of single issue politics (Miller, 1999), and social fragmentation (Boyte, 2002). Boyte observes the decline over the course of the 20th century of available common public spaces for the development of local relationships, particularly as local schools moved away from being social centers for their towns and cities (2002). Schools once were pub-

licly shared places in their communities and neighborhoods, in which people gathered for reading groups, evening classes, debates, elections, cooperative extension services, club meetings, potluck dinners, picnics, performances, immigrant resources and services, and civic renewal activities (Boyte, 2002). We now live in an age of locked-down buildings, restricted access to public school resources, one-way service providers, gated communities, privatized resources, and information overload (Boyte, 2002). These changes have resulted in what Boyte terms the “phenomenology of powerlessness” (para. 102), a sense of disengagement, ineffectualness, and alienation. Boyte further argues that higher education has contributed to this sense of powerlessness.

Today, much of our research culture is detached from the problems and currents of the larger society. Much educational experience of our students teaches a narrow view of problems as discrete and disconnected. Service or even service learning does not necessarily address this problem at all. More generally, we also often teach the kind of innocence and irresponsibility that grows from cultivating the stance of outside critics, not engaged actors. (para. 102)

A purported decline of charitable giving and membership in voluntary social and civic-minded associations in the United States has been contested, however, as some observers have noted a shift from membership in older established civic-minded organizations to newer, different, local and international ones. These include establishment of stronger networks within neighborhoods, providing resources and assistance within personal friendships (Miller, 1999), and the recent proliferation of internet-based social, cultural, and political coalitions and communities. U.S. citizens are forming looser, intermittent, informal associations instead of maintaining long-term memberships in traditional establishments (Miller, 1999). Blandy’s and Kellman’s example of the youthful, in-your-face, techno-savvy DIY (Do-It-Yourself)

movement (2004), shows just how different contemporary organized approaches to fostering civil society are, compared to only a generation ago. David Korten, writer, activist, and president of the People-Centered Development Forum, describes the emergence of self-organizing worldwide alliances of political action groups, comprised of individuals coming together from varied backgrounds and nationalities to pursue common issues (2000). Starting in the 1990s, massive organized protests were staged by global alliances of citizen activists to disrupt meetings of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, and to draw public attention to the destructive forces of global corporate hegemony (Korten, Perlas, & Shiva, 2002). Notably, the seventy thousand protesters who converged at a 1999 meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle included a broad coalition of people of faith, labor movements, environmentalists, youth, indigenous peoples, peace and human rights activists, feminists, farmers, gay and lesbian rights groups, sustainable agriculture advocates, food safety groups, and other interests (Korten, 2000).

While some civil society activists have been strongly and overtly hostile toward corporations and governments, others have adopted more academic approaches to the study and advancement of civil society, hosting research forums and engaging in inquiry, dialogue, critique, and dissemination of ideas and insights about relationships between civil society, governments, and corporate sectors. The 1991 conference *The Idea of Civil Society* sponsored by the National Humanities Center in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina (Connor, 1998) and the work of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota are two of many examples of academic approaches to the development of civil society.³ The United Nations Foundation for International Partnerships (UNFIP) engages a business-like approach based in diplomacy and coalition building. The UNFIP brings together rep-

representatives of large multi-national corporations, governments, private foundations, civil society organizations, and academia to work toward achievement of its Millennium Development Goals and provides funding for local initiatives worldwide that fulfill those goals (UNFIP, 2004).⁴ Taken together, local, national, and trans-national civil society associations utilize a variety of strategies—civil disobedience, political action, scholarly inquiry, diplomacy, and civic projects—to achieve their aims of the development of ethical public policy, citizen engagement, and public work.

Civil Society and Public Work

For Boyte, *public work* is an essential component of civil society (2002). Public work is defined by Center for Democracy and Citizenship as “sustained, visible, serious effort by a diverse mix of ordinary people that creates things of lasting civic or public significance” (2001, para. 1). Public work is full of tensions and conflicts, as people in diverse communities, from multi-cultural societies, or from different parts of the globe bring varying experiences and worldviews to problems of mutual concern (Boyte, 2002; Bridges, 2002a). Worldviews, or “life narratives” as Thomas Bridges, professor of Philosophy at Montclair State University calls them, are the life stories, myths, and metaphors that explain both the origins and possible futures of a particular group of people and embody their memories, histories, values, and beliefs about themselves (2002a). Life-narratives are maintained within particular communities, and communitarian identity and solidarity is achieved through the sharing of these narratives (Bridges, 2002b). Communities differentiate themselves from other communities and maintain their particularistic value systems through their collective life narratives (Bridges, 2002b).⁵

Understanding the manner in which individuals with different life experiences and worldviews connect and interact is central to the advancement of public work, the cultivation of civic friendship, and the promo-

tion of world peace (Boyte, 2002; Bridges, 2002a). Civic friendship is the bond that forms between persons from differing communities precisely to the degree that they are able to go beyond distinguishing and separating themselves from others on the basis of biological, economic, and cultural aspects fundamental to communitarian identity *and* at the same time to the degree that individuals’ communitarian worldviews and value systems may be maintained within such relationships (Bridges, 2002b). Civic partnerships rely on this kind of friendship. Effective civic partnerships involve mixtures of individuals with diverse backgrounds who are grounded in their own sense of identity with a particular community but who also understand and care about the values and life circumstances of others (Bridges, 2002b), who are able to negotiate and connect their different life histories and interests, who trust one another (Blandy, 1999), and who come together to solve public problems and create outcomes of broad public benefit (Boyte, 2002). Public work, in this sphere, must also be informed by knowledge about the political dimensions of citizen engagement, which includes an understanding of the dynamics of power relations between individuals and organizations within particular settings (Boyte, 2002).

How Can Art Education Foster Civil Society?

Art education can play a vital role in the development of communal identity, compassion toward others, and civic engagement. The arts allow young people to formulate and convey personal meanings and values about life (Delacruz, 1995; Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996; Wilson & Wilson, 1982), and to bond with one another within their own school and community settings. The study of varied art forms of diverse peoples provides a means by which meaningful connections between individuals with differing cultural experiences, values, and interests may be developed (Delacruz, 1992, 1995; Daniel &

Delacruz, 1993; McFee, 1996; Stuhr, 1994). In this view, art educators may provide both a special *place* within their schools and the *means through which* the development of student identity, connectedness to others, and intercultural understanding are nurtured (Delacruz, 1995; Zimmerman, 2002). Art education may advance understanding and compassion toward diverse people and cultural groups around the world, but only to the degree that art education is informed by a “critical emancipatory culturally diverse art curriculum” (jagodzinski, 1999, p. 319). Art education theory and practices must engage the study of cultural, psychological, structural, and historical aspects of power relationships between diverse peoples (jagodzinski, 1999); must seek to instill in students a sense of social justice (Garber, 2004); and must teach students how to work toward social change based on our democratic ideals of equity (Blandy & Congdon, 1987; Delacruz, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Efland, et al, 1996), freedom from want or fear, and full civic participation for all people. Cultivation of a sense of social justice and development of requisite expertise for effective civic work have been among the goals of social reconstructionists’ orientations to education since the 1960s, and as I and many others⁶ have argued elsewhere, work toward social justice is a moral mandate for art education.

An orientation to art education as activist, community-oriented, and globally connected is currently taking form in schools and universities throughout the world, through service learning lessons, school-community collaborations, civic projects, and internet-based alliances; and intriguing approaches to engaging art students in public work are emerging. But an activist and outward-looking view of art education remains on the periphery, and our involvements in civic projects (beyond student art exhibits strategically placed in select community sites) are scattered and intermittent. Social reconstruction is a formidable task for art education, and politi-

cal action aimed at social change is slow, messy, and difficult work (Delacruz, 1996b; Boyte, 2002). Tradition, inertia, resistance to change, and reactionary backlash are compounded by tightened community and school budgets, increased focus on student performance on standardized tests, and teacher, administrator, and staff overload.

Research, advocacy, and critique in art education academic discourse problematize issues of both national and worldwide concern, and allow us to focus, debate, and clarify our beliefs and values about the goals of art education in contemporary life. But academic discourse, offered at a safe distance and absent substantive engagement in public work, is itself problematic (Boyte, 2002). Schools must become public and political spaces for “productive, pluralist, public activity”, and universities must provide leadership in developing “bolder, more confident, and more political citizens” (Boyte, 2002, para. 103). If we agree that art education should foster civil society, then our mission in higher education includes development, implementation, and study of effective, feasible, and sustainable models, lesson ideas, and strategies for engaging students, K-16, in personally meaningful and socially relevant learning experiences—experiences that promote civic friendship and include civic work—while at the same time maintaining our identity as art education and reaffirming our place in public education.

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Endnotes

1. Third sector refers to voluntary associations of individuals and groups working for the common good. “It is distinguished from the public activities of government because it is voluntary, and from the private activities of markets because it seeks common ground and public goods”

(Sirianni & Friedland, n. d., para. 1). The term third sector is sometimes used synonymously with civil society.

2. Harry C. Boyte is founder, Senior Fellow, and Co-director of Center for Democracy and Citizenship, at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis-Saint Paul.

3. More than a university based scholarly institute, the Center for Democracy and Citizenship engages in public works in the greater Twin Cities Minnesota area, and uses these public works to teach and learn about citizen civic engagement.

4. The UNFIP has established four priority areas derived from UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): children's health; population and women (with a focus on adolescent girls); environment (including biodiversity, energy, and climate change); and peace, security, and human rights.

5. This is not to say that "life narratives" are monolithic or static. Individual and community identities and narratives are complex, multidimensional, polyvocal, situational, and they change over time.

6. Numerous earlier writings about the moral underpinnings of multicultural and intercultural art education offered in the 1970s and 1980s by June McFee and Rogena Degge, Laura Chapman, Karen Hamblen, Vincent Lanier, Jan Jagodzinski, Doug Blandy, and Kristin Congdon inform a contemporary vision of civil society. For concise discussions of these writings in relation to the social reconstructionist movement in education, see Delacruz, 1990, 1992, and 1995.

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