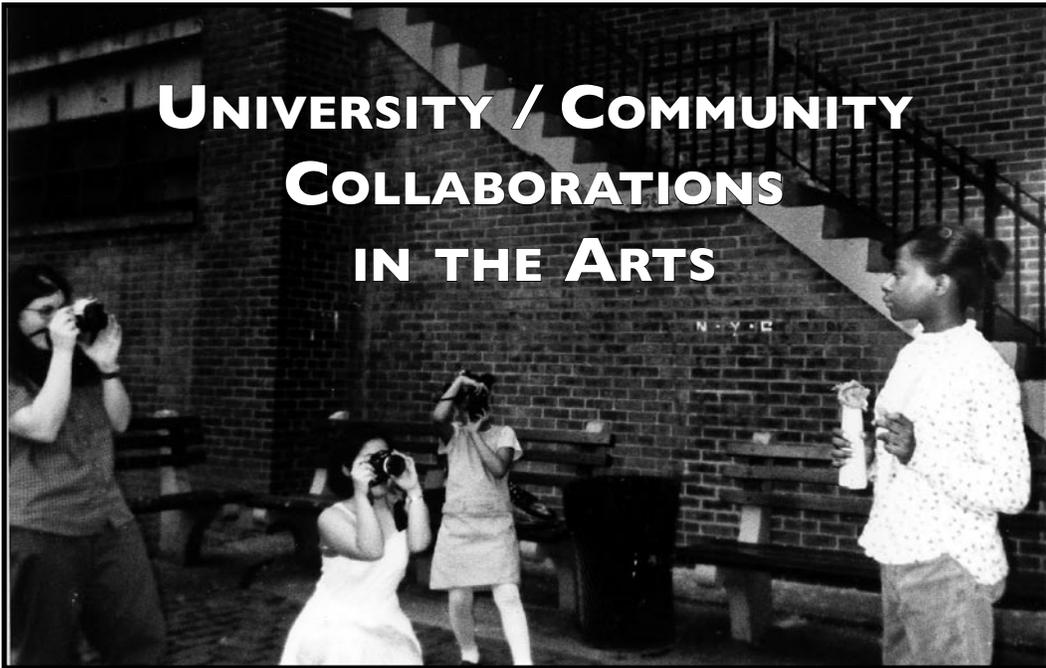


URBAN ENSEMBLE



UNIVERSITY / COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS IN THE ARTS



**TISCH SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY**

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UNIVERSITY / COMMUNITY
COLLABORATIONS
IN THE ARTS

REFLECTIONS AND EXERCISES

EDITED BY
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AND
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TISCH SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY
1995-98

COME IN

Have a seat, are you thirsty?

Come in to my life, come into my house...What you want?

Relax, take off your coat, enjoy life... You're gonna be on earth for a while.

Come in peace... leave in pieces

Collectively-generated poem from an URBAN ENSEMBLE exercise, 1995-96

URBAN ENSEMBLE (UE) is a partnership between Tisch School of the Arts and community-based organizations that share a fundamental interest in the arts. Students provide much needed support by contributing their arts expertise in a range of community settings, be it for aesthetic, therapeutic, educational or social purposes. They, in turn, expand their horizons artistically and personally, sharpen their teaching skills, and gain a sense of authority over their craft, through the encounter with a diversity of people and situations. Opening itself to NYC neighborhoods, the School fulfills a moral responsibility at the same time as better preparing its students for the 21st century.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION | 8 |
| Jan Cohen-Cruz and Lorie Novak Co-directors, Urban Ensemble | |
| COMMUNITY SITES | 10 |
| MOTIVATION | 13 |
| TEACHING | 21 |
| Approach 23 | |
| Team Teaching 24 | |
| Six Concepts of Learning 26 | |
| Problem Solving 28 | |
| EXERCISES | 37 |
| Getting Started 38 | |
| Warm-ups 40 | |
| Photography 44 | |
| Video 54 | |
| Writing 57 | |
| Drama 62 | |
| PRODUCTION | 69 |
| First Year Performance 71 | |
| Year Two 72 | |
| Books 74 | |
| Year Three 76 | |
| REFLECTION | 77 |
| The Question of Assessment 79 | |
| Participant Testimonies 80 | |
| Thoughts on Community 88 | |
| Student Responses from UE Class 91 | |
| THE COMMUNITY-BASED WORKSHOP FROM SOUP TO NUTS | 92 |
| NOTES | 95 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 96 |

INTRODUCTION

Urban Ensemble began in 1995 as an exploration of the role of the arts in violence reduction under the aegis of Tisch AmeriCorps, part of President Clinton's "domestic Peace Corps." To that end, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Carlos de Jesus, and Lorie Novak from the Departments of Drama, Film and Television, and Photography respectively, enlisted a team of ten students from the three programs. For two years, with the passionate assistance of Field Co-ordinator Toya Lillard, the students spent two hours a week training and eight hours a week in the field. We established workshops with populations at risk and, in partnership with the Joseph Papp Public Theater and Lincoln Center Theatre, set up a weekly session incorporating an exhilarating number and blend of people from many different sites.¹ Keeping within our federal mandate, we created theatrical images of violence from our lives, improvising alternative endings to suggest ways out; wrote songs and poems; composed photographs to express individual and cultural identities beyond perceived stereotypes; used video to capture both the turbulence and peacefulness of our neighborhoods.

During the first year of Urban Ensemble, we were in heavy exploration mode. Which exercises really fit these participants? How could we work with several media together? How to divide the time, at our large weekly workshop, between artmaking and dinner? (We gathered at 6 pm and provided food as people might otherwise be distracted by hunger.) How to let our students lead more and more of the work and still provide enough experienced leadership? How to not impose our aesthetics or themes but still "have" something at the end of the semester? How to work with forty, fifty people at a given session? This finding-our-way-in-the-dark was reflected in our mad dash at the end of the year to pull things together by way of a multi-media performance and a photo-text book. In the second year, students were sufficiently trained to strengthen workshops at the individual sites. Our final photo-text book and performance emerged much more gradually and organically, now that we had a common language.

When Tisch AmeriCorps ended after two years, students and faculty were enthusiastic about continuing Urban Ensemble as an ongoing project of the School. Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell concurred, seeing it as a way to address the artist's responsibility to society. Rethinking our goals and the constituencies with whom our interaction might be most efficacious, Professors Cohen-Cruz and Novak resituated Urban Ensemble as a course open to all TSOA majors. Its precepts reflect its components: art schools need to instill their students with a sense of social responsibility; young artists broaden their horizons by testing their craft in real and diverse human situations; community-based organizations that incorporate art are strengthened through the participation of serious art students; and art making is beneficial to a broad range of people for a myriad of reasons.

A field work component in arts education works against a very old paradigm: the image of the artist as misunderstood loner, at odds with society. In Suzi Gablik's *Conversations at the End of Time*, Dean Carol Becker of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago calls for a new, engaged model of the artist:

Our students need the city. They need to get right inside the life force of the city and the community. They need not to be separate, because as long as they're separate, the only thing they can generate work about is themselves. . .²

Urban Ensemble, the course, has two aspects. Students facilitate or assist, depending on their experience and confidence level, a weekly arts project at a community-based setting. More experienced students serve as teaching assistants and site liaisons. In addition to the guidance they get at the sites, students meet as a class with Lorie, Jan, and the TAs one other time each week, to reflect on the internships, learn more techniques, and look at how what we are doing fits into the School's expanding expression of the artist in society.

Community-based workshops offer reciprocal rewards. People who may never have had access to creative exploration of self and world are nurtured, both artistically and personally. Some realize formidable talents; most develop new perspectives on their lives and an enhanced sense of self-worth. Conversely, student artists benefit from interaction with a range of human experience, no matter what the venue in which they ultimately work. According to Dean Campbell, "Community service sites often require [the negotiation of] widely disparate cultural frameworks. Given our students' need to navigate in a global setting, this experience is vital."³ These internships further enhance young artists by demonstrating that art making has the capacity to cultivate more than just aesthetic proclivities. As student artists help organizations carry out social missions using the arts, their sense of art's capacity and their own artistic possibilities expand, too. "In giving back to my community," attests Film and TV graduate Christopher Gonzalez, "I've been able to put into practice all that I've acquired at TSOA, which enhances my academic, artistic, and professional development."⁴ And we as an institution fulfill a responsibility to reach out to those who have been over-looked or under-served.

This book is our effort to share facts and feelings concerning arts collaborations between the university and community arts organizations. It is organized around the whys, whats and hows of community-based art— why we do it, what it is like and how we plan, carry out and assess it. This text features a multiplicity of voices and forms—prose, poetry, images, and descriptions of projects and exercises. The student pioneers who co-invented Urban Ensemble—Chika Carter, Chris Chan Roberson, Andrew Gaines, Chris Gonzalez, Jessica Ingram, Toya Lillard, Natalie Medina, Javier Muñoz, Naomi Taubman, Laura Valdivia and Betty Yu—are off to lives beyond TSOA. This book is dedicated to the next generations of students who may be encouraged and inspired by them, and to the workshop participants for allowing us into their (inner) lives.

Jan Cohen-Cruz and Lorie Novak
New York City, Summer 1998

URBAN ENSEMBLE COMMUNITY SITES

These are the groups with which Urban Ensemble has been allied. Those with asterisks were strictly part of Tisch AmeriCorps. Others continue to be partners in keeping with Urban Ensemble's commitment to organizations that make use of art to realize their social mission.

AMERICAN INDIAN COMMUNITY HOUSE (AICH)*

AICH serves native Americans in the New York City area. Services include the Elders Program, which offers meals and social activities once a month, a comprehensive AIDS awareness campaign, classes for youth in the arts and crafts, and monthly Pow Wows open to the public.

CHILDREN AND THE CLASSICS (C&C)

This organization develops creative and innovative ways to "bring literacy and social skill programming to at-risk youth, primarily using literature and drama." Recognizing that the majority of teen pregnancies, youth crime, drug use, and gang involvement happen between the hours of 3 pm and 7 pm, C&C targets this time frame for most of its activities.

CREATIVE ALTERNATIVES OF NEW YORK (CANY)

CANY encourages the growth and health of the individual and the community through the use of creative expression. It serves people in psychiatric facilities, residences for the homeless, drug rehab centers, and programs for children with learning disabilities,

GROOVE WITH ME

This Lower East Side program offers young girls free classes in hip hop, jazz, funk, dance hall, modern, African, tap, reggae, folk, and Brazilian dance. They explore the relationship between particular dance genres and the cultures that spawned them, focusing on the relevance for the participating group.

HETRICK-MARTIN INSTITUTE

Located two blocks from Tisch on Astor Place, The Hetrick-Martin Institute is the oldest and largest not-for-profit multi-service agency serving gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. The Institute serves more than 7,500 youth each year with a broad range of vital services including individual, group, and family counseling; an after-school Drop-In Center; the Harvey Milk School; training on issues of sexuality and HIV/AIDS for youth and professionals; youth leadership programs; and Project First Step and Cafe HMI for homeless youth. Hetrick-Martin also offers theatre, photography, and video programs.

IMMIGRANT SOCIAL SERVICES (ISS)*

Located on the Lower East Side, ISS serves recent Chinese immigrants of all ages, offering assistance in learning English, job placement, and childcare. It has a strong after-school program that operates year-long. The facility is small, yet houses computers, textbooks, cameras, and video equipment.

PROJECT GREENHOPE*

Project Greenhope is an alternative residential rehabilitation facility that predominately serves women of color in exchange for early release from prison. For six months to a year, they are counseled daily and administered medication to aid in breaking addictions. The facility also sponsors speakers, workshops, and trips to plays.

PROJECT HARMONY

Located in Harlem, Project Harmony strives to help participants take an active role in the building/re-building of their communities through gardening, business endeavors, and the arts.

SCHOOL FOR THE PHYSICAL CITY (SPC)

This alternative 6th through 12th grade public school is the site of theatre, video and photography workshops. Whether by filming student stories, integrating drama into the academic curriculum, or co-creating a photo program, UE assists the school in its commitment to use the arts in the learning process.

WASHINGTON HOUSES COMMUNITY CENTER (WHCC)

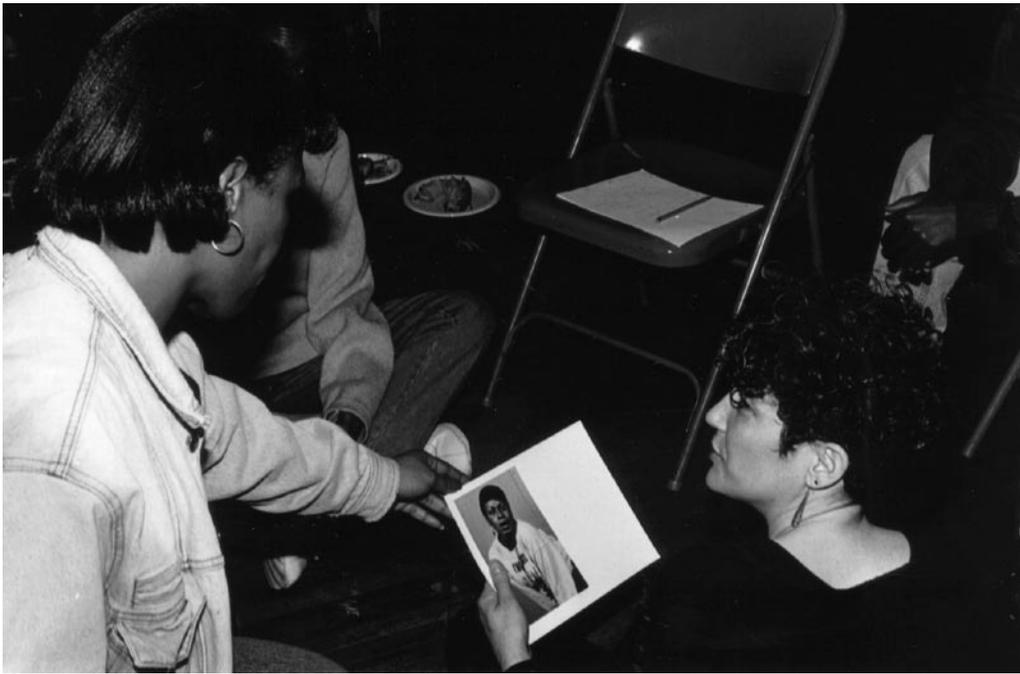
Part of Union Settlement, WHCC sits next to the housing development by the same name. The Center, located on 98th Street and Third Avenue provides services for young people up to age 21 who live, work, and/or attend school in East Harlem. The facility houses computers, a large game room, a recording studio, and a darkroom. It provides counseling, vocational training, job placement, academic tutoring, and drama, photography, arts and crafts, dance, music, and video classes. The Center also sponsors field trips to plays, museums, concerts, swimming pools, and sports events.

YOUNG ADULT LEARNING CENTER (YALA)*

Located in East Harlem, YALA is a fully accredited program that provides young adults who have had difficulty in school with the opportunity to complete their requirements and graduate. YALA students are predominately young people of color between the ages of 18 and 25 who hold jobs or have children. Through flexible scheduling—most students attend half a day—YALA has provided many young adults with learning difficulties the chance to get back on track and forge ahead with their lives.

MOTIVATION

Most Americans perceive the arts as elitist and marginal activities. According to an extensive report commissioned by Jane Alexander while chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, the single most important factor for the disinterest in the arts on the part of the American public is that most people don't sense a connection between the arts and their lives.⁵ Urban Ensemble is a tiny step towards generating a new paradigm for the arts.



LORIE NOVAK: In 1988, I applied to the New York Foundation for the Art's (NYFA) artist-in-residency program to teach photography in community-based settings. I had assumed my experience teaching both college and community arts would make me a shoe-in. But in my interview at NYFA, I was taken aback by the panel's main question: Why did I want this opportunity if I was already teaching at NYU and School of Visual Arts? I felt they were asking me why I was taking this step backwards.

I had no trouble answering. I missed working outside of the academy. I wanted to work with young people who had not chosen photography as their career, did not know the power of communicating with the camera, did not realize how creative they could be. I wanted to give back what I had been given. I had started photography in high school. I went to a public school in Los Angeles that had a large darkroom with a full-time teacher who taught only photography. I took my first photography class on a whim—my older next door neighbor Arlene had taken it—and it changed my life.

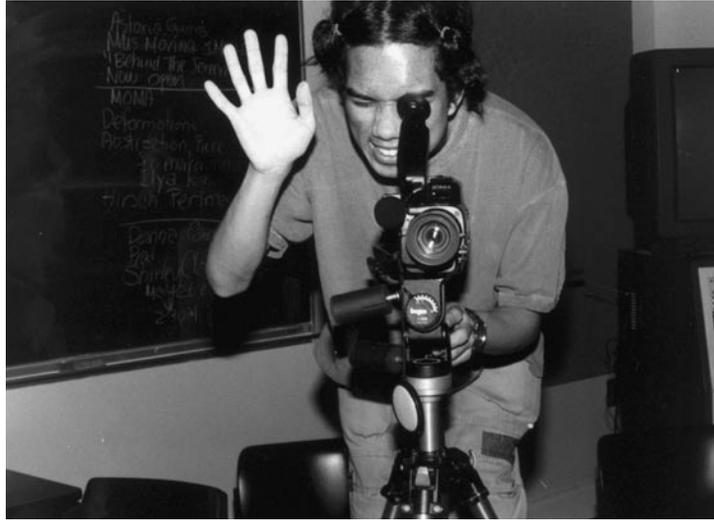
I have been leading photography and visual arts workshops since I was a junior in college—in schools for special needs children, at an outreach office in a housing project, and for an inward bound program. I had no teachers who encouraged me to do this or could offer me guidance. I volunteered to set up photography programs at places where I was tutoring and just used my intuition. In the middle of my two years at a graduate program in photography, I took a year off and got a full-time job in an outreach office in a housing project that was a part of a counseling center for children. I had supervisors who trained me in leading groups; for the art part I relied upon my own background. As great as this job was, I had no time for my own photographic work, so I returned to graduate school promising myself that I would somehow find a way to do my own art and work in community settings. Ten years later was my NYFA interview.

I was accepted into the artist-in-residency program and through that, was hired to establish a photography program at Washington Houses Community Center (WHCC.) The first year I was in the after school program with youth ages 8-12 and the second year I initiated (with Nancy Wechter) an evening photography program for teens. It was (and is) a loud, chaotic, crazy place and I loved it. We had a cramped little darkroom and did amazing things. When I was hired to teach at NYU full-time, the demands of both jobs were too much so after two wonderful years, I left WHCC. I have, however, continued my relationship with the Center. Groups of children and teens regularly come to NYU to use our studios. There have been many raucous collaborative photo shoots with Tisch photo students.



This photograph is from a collaborative photo shoot in the Tisch Photo studio. The NYU students set up the lights and the WHCC teens came with clothing from the 1970s to create images for an intergenerational book about East Harlem they were creating.

When we were first establishing Urban Ensemble, I brought WHCC into the project and now, much to my pleasure, Washington Houses is a vital part of Urban Ensemble. A number of the participants—Tarik, Kareem, Courtney—were in my photography workshops when they were eight or nine. Now in her third year with Urban Ensemble, photo student Jessica Ingram teaches them. She's been teaching at WHCC longer than I did. Last spring she trained Malia and Lauren, two Tisch photography sophomores. As an artist and educator, engaging in these collaborations with my students and community organizations both challenges and satisfies me in ways that working solely within the university and art world cannot.



CHRIS CHAN ROBERSON: Kitty Genovese was killed in Queens several decades ago. She died as a result of the bystander effect: all her neighbors watched because they thought someone else would help. She was murdered in front of everyone. I was born fifteen years or so after her death. I learned about Ms. Genovese in a psychology class my sophomore year of college.

Apply Kitty Genovese and the bystander effect to daily living. How many things do we watch happen in front of us? Not only do we not react, we automatically assume someone else is going to do something. The homeless? Pollution? It's someone else's problem.

Urban Ensemble/AmeriCorps (when it was alive and kicking) was a way, for me at least, to help out. I didn't want to give money or mail a check somewhere; I needed to be there in the trenches. While in AmeriCorps, I worked at the American Indian Community House. They had wanted to document the stories of Elders but when they tried to capture their words on video, the filmmakers were very rude and disrespectful. It was our job to create a way to record the stories of the Elders without setting up huge cameras or pissing anyone off. I saw this as an incredible opportunity to not only learn, but to do something different. We came up with several non-traditional recording methods, including having members of the Youth Council writing poetry inspired by the stories, even telling stories of their own that paralleled the stories they recorded of the Elders. Unfortunately, things did not work out. As a film student, I wanted to bring a camera along with every kind of light I could get my hands on. But I was told that I had to go a minimalist route. It was even more frustrating to find a solution, only to find it fall through. Plus we had irresolvable scheduling problems. I did the only thing I could do: move on.

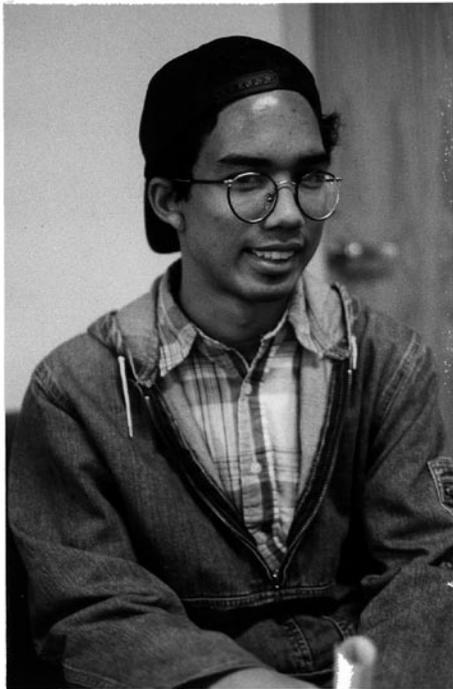
I wound up with Jessica Ingram at Project Greenhope, an alternative to incarceration for women. Several times I ran activities by myself. One of the women told me that I was the first man they had interacted with in half a year. That was the first moment I can recall when I felt a hair uncomfortable. Pretty soon, it was myself and a student named Keeley leading activities involving drama, poetry, and video. I gave one of the participants a video camera and told her to shoot some footage. She looked at the camera like it was a hot piece of coal, saying, "I don't want to use that thing!" I don't think she didn't want to, but she

felt that she didn't have the training or wasn't smart enough. Once one person used it, several others jumped up saying they wanted to try as well.

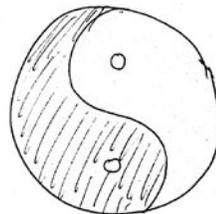
After years of film school studying craft and learning about high tech equipment and the "great" filmmakers, I figured out that anyone can produce art, given the right environment. We weren't out there to rehabilitate anyone; we were out there to share stories, to find new ways to produce communal, urban art. We weren't trying to save the world. We didn't walk around with a holier than thou attitude. To quote an old friend of mine, the world was our sandbox and we wanted everyone to play with us. The only difference was that we had nicer shovels.

Some people might tell you there's no such thing as altruism. Possibly, and if that's true then I have two reasons for working with Urban Ensemble. The first is to listen to people's stories. People need to tell their stories in part to vent, in part to share, in part to leave their legacy. The second reason is for Kitty Genovese, a woman I never met who died before I was even born. If I felt too tired to work in Urban Ensemble, someone else might do it. Who knows? But I'm not willing to find out the hard way.

See you in the sandbox!



Who am I?



BETTY YU: Because I come from an immigrant working class background, I really identify with the inaccessibility of the arts to low income communities of color. This is what attracted me to Urban Ensemble. What made it really worthwhile were the relationships cultivated between individuals. Through working with people from various sites, many preconceived ideas about race were challenged. This was the first time that many of us had been part of such a diverse group. The arts have become so exclusively bourgeois and commercialized that these sessions reminded me of why I was at Tisch.

A contradiction exists in some community service projects. Receiving little or no stipends, you have to come from a privileged class in order to do it. For me, it meant juggling two jobs plus school. It certainly tested my level of endurance and commitment. I really identify with the many people who wish to commit themselves to grass roots work but can't because of their financial burdens.



(left to right) Delores, Betty, and Chika during an Urban Ensemble workshop at Tisch

CHIKA CARTER: I have always been drawn to community service. Before UE, I tutored children but that got rather monotonous. It served a purpose by helping them in their school work but it lacked creativity because it was the same thing everyday. Urban Ensemble and I connected better.

JAN COHEN-CRUZ:

"Because you have imagined love, you have not loved; merely because you have imagined brotherhood, you have not made brotherhood." —Muriel Rukeyser⁶

When I was twenty years old, I joined the New York City Street Theatre-Jonah Project. In addition to performing for a mind-expanding range of people, I co-led a drama workshop at a men's maximum security prison in New Jersey. I was amazed by how much the guys wanted to express and communicate. For the first time I experienced theatre more as an art of creation than interpretation. I was inspired to express what I, too, needed to say, breaking the hold that the desire to please had on me. I also realized that I unconsciously carried (erroneous) prejudices about inmates.

The prison workshop made such an impact on my life that I came to believe artists have much to gain from field work; that they are cultural workers akin to anthropologists. One experience like Trenton State Prison can serve as a key to knowing, with one's whole being, that any idea one carries about any group pales in comparison to the complexity and diversity of real people in that circumstance. An artist does not then have to work with union members, cleaning people, health care workers, or prostitutes to know that the people who do those things are also diverse and complex. However, they may want to, once they realize the richness of stories that people carry and rarely get to tell publicly.



Jan demonstrating a theatre game

Theatrical field work can lead to integration of under-utilized parts of ourselves. Even as drama therapy endeavors to, say, strengthen a meek patient by having them play the role of a very powerful person, theatre provides anyone the chance to try out potentialities which may not otherwise come to light. Whether or not we live out these parts of ourselves, a workshop can still be a safe place to explore them. We seem each to have an "A" list of accessible emotions and a "B" list of repressed ones. Yet all these emotions course about inside us. Artmaking is a way to "know thyself," and it is a way to know others as well.

My life is a work-in-progress
There is always room for a rehearsal,
a revision, an edit.
It seems I am always being
introduced to a new role
with no preparation, but once
I've got it, I've got it.
I'm a thespian
An actor trained in the step-by-step method.
With God as my acting coach.

TEACHING



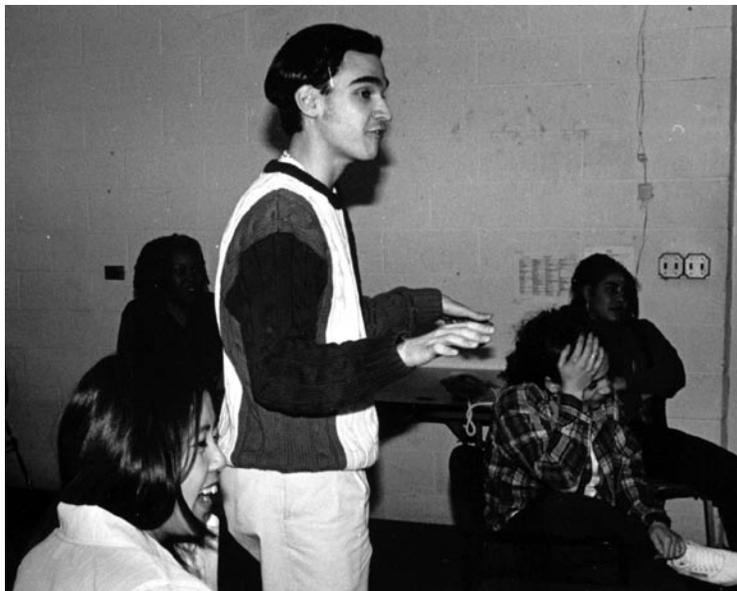
Many of the students are in a position of responsibility and even authority for the first time. They teach instead of being taught, and experience the joys and challenges of interdisciplinary and multi-cultural collaboration.

APPROACH

Our students do not lead their own workshops until they have assisted other artists in their workshops. Like traditional apprenticeships, many aspects of art are absorbed through the doing and cannot be taught out of context.

By the time students lead their own classes, they have an arsenal of exercises and approaches under their belts, a range of workshop patterns to choose from (such as beginning with a warm-up, moving into a main activity and ending with a closure exercise), a handle on teaching and an ability to imagine a workshop overview of which each session is a part. They set up a goal, such as a date for a show to open to participants' family and friends. Then they plan backwards from there. By when must scenes be on their feet, or a cluster of photos on a given subject shot, printed and framed? How will they balance building the group with getting product-oriented work done? What skills do they hope to impart and by when? Lorie, Jan, and the UE TAs are available for brainstorming and trouble-shooting each others' workshops-in-progress at weekly meetings. Equally important, the students teach in pairs.

Having spent hours learning art themselves, TSOA students have much to draw upon. We encourage students to overplan the sessions; it's easier to do less than planned than to try to come up with more on the spot. We also advise them to be ready to change their plan or drop it if something more compelling comes up.



Javier leading a YALA drama workshop

TEAM TEACHING

Initially, we place students at the sites in pairs. This helps tremendously in dealing with large groups as well as with individual issues that come up in any size group. Student pairs introduce their classes, and each other, to a greater range of exercises, often from different artistic disciplines. Team teachers have someone with whom to travel, plan, carry out, and reflect.

However, following one's intuition is key to facilitating a workshop. How is this possible in a team teaching situation? If one senses that an exercise is not working, or that it is working so well it should be taken further, how does one signal one's teaching partner without breaking the flow of the work? And what if the partner perceives the situation differently?

Successful team teaching requires time—to talk about what each wants, sees, needs. Different strategies may be useful—deciding which partner will follow her instinct at any given session, or who will deal with individual issues as they arise, or how to alternate facilitating. The teaching partnership between Lorie and Jan, providing both an interdisciplinary (photo and drama respectively) and a teaching model, has thus been a touchstone of the project.

CHRIS CR: It took me three train rides to fall in love with Erin [Donnelly.] Anyone can work hard; anyone can put in long hours, but if you don't give a damn about what you're doing, then you are just going through the motions. The first train ride I realized she was a hard worker. Over her shoulder was a huge bag that was filled with writings students did the previous week. By sight she knew which person did what piece, what it was about, and why they creatively did what they did. On the second train ride she was able to recite from memory all of the participants, what projects they did, their potential, their strengths, their weaknesses. On the third ride the train broke down and we had to walk. It was always a struggle. I don't think she ever complained, she took everything in stride, even when only one person showed up or things were canceled without anyone letting us know. She wasn't going through the motions, she was enjoying the ride.

ANDREW GAINES: I heard my teaching partner say, "Hey, the sooner we get this over with, the sooner you'll get home." Even though she was responding to someone's desire to go home, I winced at her comment. It reinforced the idea that this activity was a punishment. We had a long discussion all the way home about team teaching—not imposing our styles on each other but recognizing the problem with some approaches like framing the workshop as punishment rather than discipline.



JAN: Any day you ask me what it's like to team teach with Lorie I'll answer something else. Because it changes, based on what we're doing. Sometimes the thrill is entering the visual world of photography. Lorie uses phrases like "the anxiety of being seen" and "photos as legends" that send chills down my spine. Sometimes it's the relief of working with someone who's organized and competent. I'm freer to just be in the room; I'm not the only one holding the structure together. Today it's seeing that her generosity in community work is not only because she's clear about how it nourishes her, but also because she is clear about it not being her personal art outlet. I'm sure it is partly because of Lorie that I'm working on a one-woman show for the first time in fifteen years.

LORIE: Most nights I send Jan email about something or another concerning our work together knowing that she will read it and answer me early the next morning when she checks her mail while drinking her coffee. Then when I am drinking my morning coffee (I sleep later), I know I can go to my computer and find email from Jan. We developed this habit as effortlessly as the rest of our working methods with each other fell into place.

Working with Jan is what collaboration should be—together we are able to create things that are richer than what we each could have done on our own. We push each other as well as recognize and draw upon each other's strengths and different points of views. This book is a perfect example of our collaborative efforts. I am constantly learning from Jan. I trust her and feel supported and challenged.

6 CONCEPTS OF LEARNING BY SUSAN INGALLS,⁷ DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND THE CLASSICS

1 The Key Positive Experience

Most adults can recall certain experiences from their youth that have had profoundly positive effects on their lives. These extraordinary, highly-charged experiences, which come in tandem with major challenges, unlock the door to reaching one's full potential. Key Positive Experiences become the defining experiences of our youth.

Afterschool learning and arts programs, organized sports and summer camps -- prime examples of Key Positive Experiences -- become part of a young person's emotional reservoir and instill resilience and a sense of hope as a young person encounters challenges throughout life.

2 An Environment for Transformation

Young people's emotional development is dramatically influenced by the knowledge and power that they can "change the world." Creating an Environment for Transformation allows young people to make modest yet meaningful changes to the physical space around them which results in feelings of possibility and effectiveness.

Whether young people turn their cafeteria into a theater or their classroom into a dance space, they are actively demonstrating their capacity to affect their world and to create change.

3 A Sympathetic Witness

The presence of a Sympathetic Witness is a key factor in the survival and healthy development of children and teens. The Sympathetic Witness is an adult, outside of the immediate family, who is a consistent source of support and encouragement to a young person and who believes in the young person's potential.

A Sympathetic Witness can be a teacher, a youth practitioner, a neighbor, a mentor, an extended family member or a Big Brother or Big Sister. A quality afterschool program is a perfect place for a young person to find a Sympathetic Witness.

4 Journeys to Other Worlds

Young people rely on the power of imagination to make sense of the world. When we expose young people to rich stories and classic literature, they can become Snow White or Sinbad, Alice in Wonderland or the Tin Man from Oz. During these fantastic Journeys to Other Worlds, young people discover road maps that guide them through fictional challenges and solutions they will bring back with them into their lives.

By allowing youth to identify with fictional characters and experiences, they find ways to cope with an increasingly complex world.

5 Communal Storytelling

Storytelling plays an important role in young people's lives. Communal Storytelling, sharing stories through performance or presentation, creates a common language for expressing feelings and experiences and leads to greater understanding within a community. Communal Storytelling also communicates values.

Community-based programs, due to their accessibility and because they serve people of many generations simultaneously, are the ideal venues for Communal Storytelling events.

6 Culture of Care & Commitment

The goal of any school, youth service agency, community center or afterschool program is to weave a Culture of Care and Commitment around each and every young person under its care. Creating a structured environment where children and teens feel emotionally nourished, supported and safe engenders a sense of belonging and ownership that make effective learning possible.

SYMPATHETIC WITNESS

Jessica Ingram provides a dual example of "Sympathetic Witness" in the context of a project she initiated at WHCC in which children were photographing their dreams:

Nine year old Monique said she wanted to be with her mom in her dream and then the tears welled up in her eyes. We went to the side and she cried and told me how hard it is to talk to people and that she's lonely and just wants someone around to listen to her and understand. I understood because I often feel the same way. I remembered what Susan Ingalls said about being a sympathetic witness through the teaching we do. But I realized that Monique was also my sympathetic witness because she wanted to know how and why I understood, and I told her. Then we photographed her dream and in it, I played her mom.



Monique

This is when me and my mom
are skiping to the carnival,
ya!

These photographs are excerpts from Monique's story in the book *Dreams* created in the photo workshop lead by Jessica, Malia Matooka, and Lauren Morgan in spring 1998.



This is my mom giving
me a ring and
Candy. yippy!

PROBLEM SOLVING

Urban Ensemble offers the opportunity to experience diversity regarding race, ethnicity and class. The arts provide a useful medium through which to appreciate human commonality and difference, for NYU students and community participants alike. But such work is not easy. Here are some of the challenges that we face, imbedded in anecdotes of how they have come up, and followed by examples of ways we think about them.

I. COMING INTO A SITUATION AS "THE OTHER," USUALLY WITH MORE SOCIAL CLOUT BECAUSE OF EDUCATION, CLASS AND/OR RACE

ANDREW: When I was preparing to teach an acting workshop at Washington Houses Community Center in the summer of 1997, I expected trouble. First off, my dreams of getting participants to create deep, engaging street theatre were quite ambitious. Secondly, I was nervous, scared, wondering if I had any business going into an unfamiliar community to bring this wonderful gift of art. I thought to myself, "Who do I think I am—some White Boy-Art God going up to Harlem to teach these kids The Way?!" My mentor, Jan Cohen-Cruz, asked me back the same question, "Why ARE you doing this?"

I took time to consider. I definitely had something to impart about acting. Although my teaching experience was limited to leading a few workshops, I liked it, and I wanted to get better at it. The Washington Houses teens were interested, talented, and oppressed and I could encourage their voices. And I was fascinated by the art and spirit of street theatre and wanted to see it come to life. After grounding myself in a purpose, I was able to continue planning my syllabus.

The group took well to me personally, but showed a lot of resistance to the exercises and were unfocused, disrespectful to their peers and to me, and distrusting of themselves and the others. They were inconsistent in attendance and/or punctuality. These were significant obstacles to overcome before even approaching the demanding physical training a street performance would require.

I learned a lot from team teaching with site coordinator Toya Lillard. For instance, if someone talked over someone else on or off-stage, Toya would immediately stop and sternly raise her voice: "Excuse me, but I don't think you are respecting the people here who are trying to do the exercise! When it is your turn, I know you'll want us to listen to you. You really need to give each other some respect. It's really rude. Thank you." To the interrupted actor she would say, "Go on please." And they would shut right up and do the exercise. I would never have had the guts to speak to this group like that. I definitely felt aggravated and disappointed inside, but my attitude and use of language was always aimed at trying to be their equal, a nice, cool guy. I came to merely share my craft. Yet I knew that the disrespect going on was causing an uncontrollable and unsafe atmosphere—psychologically, emotionally, and, at times, physically.

How did she get them to behave "respectfully?" I immediately guessed that it was because she was black, a woman, more experienced at leading groups, and the oldest of the participants, about 25. Perhaps her race allowed her greater ease in preaching to her own community. I was really scared to follow her lead. Who was I to get angry at their behavior? I was afraid they would think I was condemning them, and acting superior. I felt that it wasn't my moral place to communicate that way to this community. I wanted to teach by example, behaving the way I wanted them to. But my "C'mon guys, listen," never had the same impact as my supervisor's strict yet maternal choice of words and tone.

Early on, I suggested we come up with a written contract. They agreed. I thought that giving them the opportunity to create it themselves would empower them. Any rule proposed had to be passed by everyone and we discussed any objection. We agreed on respect, being on time, seriousness, focus, and full participation. We found that when one person just watched, it led to others doing the same. Observers also inhibited the performers. The group-created rules worked for a while but were difficult to enforce with our fluctuating attendance and new members.

Then Jan helped me recognize that I could incorporate what the participants gave me. So when a basic, physical impulse exercise became more like a dance, I switched to a rhythm game that recaptured their attention and still served as an acting lesson. This technique of adjusting my lesson plan to the group became a theme for the whole summer. Second, I saw that I couldn't continue to depend on Toya or any of the other Urban Ensemble members to be my partner. I had to take a risk and potentially fail. I became more driven by the challenge. My journal filled up with ideas and problems. My days filled up with thoughts about the workshop.

Then things began to happen for our group. I hope that it had something to do with me. Maybe other leaders would have just given up and never returned. But the more time I spent at the Center, the more comfortable I became and my comfort helped build my confidence. The new neighborhood and different community/culture no longer felt so threatening and intimidating. It felt inviting to be greeted or given a pleasant look from the regulars around the Center. Attendance and concentration within the group picked up. People began to feel safe to express themselves and enjoy it. I even got the group to increase meeting times from two to three times a week.

- Check in with yourself re: intention. Make sure you're clear about what you hope to learn too. Communicate that you seek exchange, not control. Look for ways to learn from people you are working with and to let them know that you are learning from them. (See Dwight Conquergood's essay, "Health Theatre in a Hmong Refugee Camp."⁸ He embraced native healing practices even as he encouraged the Hmong to use certain western medical methods.)
- Many community arts organizations place facilitators in teams in which at least one of the pair shares a fundamental identity with the population (race, ethnicity, class, etc).
- Have a strong liaison in the organization in which you are working who really wants you there, believes in the work, is a model/bridge who, partly by example, will help build confidence in you for the community.
- You may seek a way through the work for these feelings to be expressed and responded to; see, for example, the Cultural Mapping exercise, page 41.

III. UNCOMFORTABLE AGE DIFFERENCE, OR LACK THEREOF, BETWEEN YOU AND PARTICIPANTS

JAVIER MUÑOZ: When I was 20 years old, I taught a workshop for thirteen Blacks and Latinos ranging from 19-25 year olds. Because we were so close in age, I feared that they wouldn't give me the respect and trust to lead them. But they all thought I was in my late twenties. I never told them my real age because I felt it would make them uncomfortable.

- You can't change your age and do not need to hide it. If the age gap is great and participants seem to feel you therefore can't understand them, perhaps develop a cadre of sub-leaders from the group. If your ages feel too close, make sure to do things that prove your expertise and your ability to lead all the same. Maybe do some writing exercises around age and assumptions. (You might find out you are projecting.) On the other hand, the age issue may just be a cover for something else. See "attitude" section on the next page.

III. ATTITUDE: IF YOU FEEL PARTICIPANTS DON'T RESPECT/LIKE/TRUST YOU

JESSICA: During the first year I taught at WHCC, I felt like I was under heavy scrutiny, really taking a test: not by the center administrators or other teachers but by the students. I heard comments about my color, my age, my capabilities as a teacher, and more. Sometimes I would ignore them, and other times I would address them. I felt that it would be better in the long run if I kept teaching and didn't give in, even though sometimes I wanted to. Just a few of the students were like that but sometimes that's all it takes to be discouraged.

When I came back the second year I was amazed at the responses. Students who had been a problem were no longer, and I felt thoroughly welcomed. I realized after many "I can't believe you actually came back" comments, my return had led them to finally feel they could trust me. This was a valuable lesson. I had to prove that I was committed to them and that they could trust that commitment before they would show me that they were glad I was there. Some of the very students who'd made the harsh comments came up and told me that it was good I had not put up with their remarks in the past. I had earned their respect. It is a delicate balance to be new and in a position where you need to be respected and in charge but you also want to be liked.

- Who invited you there? Are people participating by choice? Is there a forum to assess choice of exercise/ projects?
- Can the organizational liaison visit a workshop to see what's happening, help you understand the dynamic?
- Expect to have to "prove" your commitment.

IV. BOUNDARIES: THE QUESTION OF HELPING PERSONS OUT BEYOND THE WORKSHOP WITH TIME, MONEY OR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS.

JAN: Co-facilitating a theatre workshop at a men's maximum security prison at the age of 21 turned my world on its head. The men were so different than I expected criminals to be. The lives that spawned them were so brutal. The prison conditions were so dehumanizing. All boundaries flew out the window. These ranged from the mundane—I gave all my ear-

ings away, one by one, to many of the workshop participants with one pierced ear—to the profound. I gave up a theatre workshop with members of the Open Theatre that I had loved. I got obsessed with the guys' court cases, spending all my free time finding sympathetic lawyers to take them on pro bono and doing as much of the legal footwork myself as possible. I made endless visits, cooked countless food packages, wrote and received scores of letters. I dropped out of college—not fair if they, too, couldn't have a good education. I virtually removed myself from the very structures that made me valuable in the workshop. It lasted a little over a year. Then I was expelled from the prison on a trumped up charge. I eventually found my way back to what I love doing. I do not regret my temporary obsession but shudder when I think of the damage it could have done me.

Less dramatically, sometimes as workshop leaders, people from the sites ask for our advice. Sometimes the issues are extremely heavy—in one case, a teenager was trying to decide whether or not to terminate her pregnancy. We agreed that it's valuable to help them consider their options, imagine the ramifications of their choices, and ask questions to open up the issue. Make clear that what you say is your opinion, not The Truth.

JAVIER: One of my students was arrested for mugging and shooting someone at another school. I was asked if he was in class that day because the incident happened during my class time. But half way through the year I had stopped taking attendance so I had no record. His homeroom had him marked as present for that day, but the students could leave school any time. The only record of his being present in my class was my own memory, which was not substantial enough for the school to use as proof. To this day I remember him being in class but he was arrested anyhow and the class and I were devastated. This young man was so resistant to participation in the beginning, but he kept coming to class, so something engaged him. Pretty soon he was in all the improvs and writing his own scenes and directing and working just as hard as all the others. Then he was arrested. Maybe my memory is wrong; maybe I just want it so much to be true that he was in class that day. But he went to jail and all I could think was, "Damn it, I lost one."

- Remember what the arts can do and what they can't do; what you can do and what you can't do. Face these limitations and try to bear that we live in an unjust world but you are not single-handedly able to fix it. Where possible, focus your compassion into institutional improvements, i.e. leaving something behind that will help many people over time.
- Talk to other people who are going, or have through similar experiences including people at the site. Don't get isolated with the overwhelming feelings.



A simple method to solve the problem of identifying who took which photograph in a group photo session is to have each participant photograph him/herself with arms outstretched before starting to shoot. Interesting self portraits are often created.

V. DEALING WITH PARTICIPANTS WHO COME LATE OR INFREQUENTLY

JESSICA: The first year I would politely ask if they would try to come on time. If they were still late or did not always come, they missed what happened without them, but I would act like it was fine. By the second year I realized that I was treating a group of adults like children, and I made clear how important good attendance was to the project. I still felt bad because I thought that I was being mean or too hard edged about it, but their tardiness and inconsistency also affected the group. I also learned to plan around inconsistency. I would think of an activity that was suitable for a one time only experience. For example, if at the first session I explained the mechanics of the camera and then two weeks later someone new came, I could give them a point and shoot camera. That way, they got to try out photography without me having to back track. Then if I saw that the person was coming regularly, I took them aside and explained the camera to them or had one of the other participants do so.

- Build a sense of valuing each individual in the group so everyone will want everyone to come, and try to encourage it. Try to avoid the "police" role.
- Find a way to reward those who do come on time and consistently rather than punish those who do not.
- If you are working with a partner (and we hope you are), maybe one person can move ahead with the participants who are there enough; the other can work with those who are less consistent.



photograph from WHCC photo group, spring 1998

VI. TEACHING TECHNICAL SKILLS OUTSIDE OF A STRUCTURED CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

LORIE: In teaching photography, I have found that hands-on instruction works best. Give instructions on how to use a camera in the field and review as you look at contact sheets or prints. I avoid asking, "Do you know how to do this?", because it rarely elicits an honest response. Teens don't like to admit they don't know something—it's often a matter of pride or embarrassment. Conversely, those that are insecure will say they don't know something when they do. I have found that if you just start explaining something, the students will stop you if they know it and happily listen if they don't.

VII. DEALING WITH LARGE GROUPS

JAVIER: I was directing a play at a Children and the Classics site with thirty-two children ages six to twelve. In order to work with all the kids at once and still get what I needed to get done, I came up with a structure for the hour and a half sessions. This is an idea that really works. Break the kids up into five groups or stations with a staff person or intern at each. In this case, the first was the acting station with me directing the kids. The next was a singing station, where kids could learn the songs and lyrics, what the lyrics mean, why their characters sing these songs. There was a drawing station where the kids would draw a picture of their character and write a little story about them or draw a scene from the play and narrate it in written form. At a smaller acting station, little kids learned how to say big words they'd never seen before and what they meant, and did theatre games to develop character. The last group was a game station where the kids would do games that built an ensemble and an environment of trust and respect for each other.

VIII. FIGHTING

NAOMI TAUBMAN: I remember one incident when two of my students began hitting each other over a camera. Here I was, teaching non-violence and my students were fighting. I immediately pulled them apart and explained that they should bring problems to me and together we would talk them out. But they were absolutely never to hit each other. One of the boys turned to me and yelled, "My mama told me to hit anyone if I need to, even a teacher." All my hours of conflict resolution training had not prepared me for that boy's remark. I suppose his mother was teaching him self-defense, perhaps the only way that she knows how to defend herself. It's difficult to figure out where the cycle of violence begins and how to end it. I continued to insist on no hitting during class. At least for our two hours a week together, those kids were in a violence-free environment.

IX. STEREOTYPES

JOANNE RUELOS: The 'Make Me Laugh' exercise mostly involved making faces and yelling. But when the time came for them to try to get me to laugh, I got the impression that the girls were trying to imitate stereotypical Asians. Someone slanted her eyes then quickly stopped, one pretended to speak in another language but it sounded like Spanish so I was pretty confused, and English was spoken with a broken accent. It caught me so off guard, it's so in your face. But I realized I definitely should have said something. If indeed they were using Asian stereotypes, why? Did they think that's what I would relate to because I'm Asian?



Photographs from Naomi's YALA photo workshop in 1995-96.
above by Erick Lee, image to the right by Maria Rodriguez

X. STUDENTS INTIMIDATED BY ART MAKING

NAOMI: He was afraid to shoot. It was only my second week of teaching photography and one of the students was literally afraid to push the shutter.

I asked him to stay after class. I was nervous; so was he.

"Let's go."

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Outside."

We stood on the corner together, cars honking, people rushing, pigeons above, subway below. I handed him the camera and took my stop watch off my wrist.

"Take fifteen pictures in the next thirty seconds."

"What? I can't."

"You can."

"Miss Naomi --"

"Ready?"

He looked terrified.

"Go."

He didn't even hold the camera up to his eye. Click.

"One. Take another."

He pushed the shutter again. It was locked.

"Advance your film!"

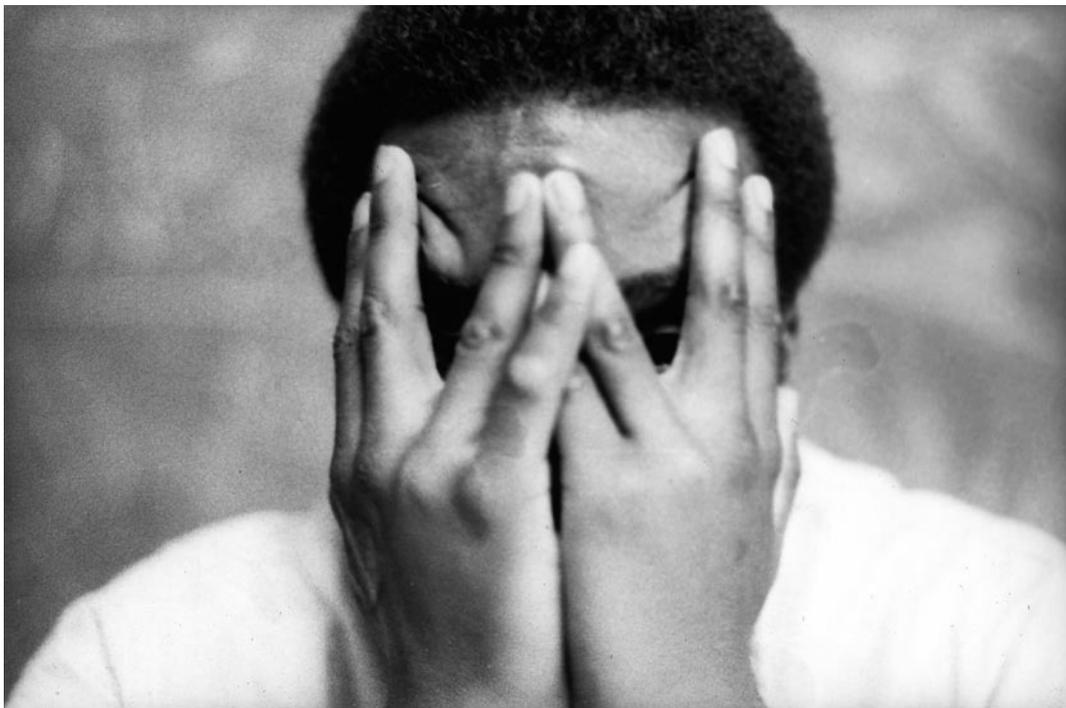
And he began to shoot. He looked up, looked down, he turned the camera sideways and upside down.

"Again, again! Nine more."

We laughed. He shot fifteen images in thirty-five seconds. He never even moved his feet. We stood there a moment, catching our breath. He handed the camera back to me.

"I'll see you in class next week," I told him.

And he was there.



XI. WHEN SOMEONE PARTICIPATING IN YOUR WORKSHOP APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN, OR IS BEING ABUSED OR IS IN TROUBLE

MICHAELA LESLIE-RULE: I was tutoring two elementary school children who were behind in their studies. In the middle of the term, one of the students arrived with a massive welt on the side of his face. He was withdrawn, and lacked his usual attention span and energy. At free time he hid under one of the desks. I took him aside, and asked him what was going on. He immediately told me where the welt had come from, and that I shouldn't tell anyone. It was difficult at the end of the hour, sending him back to his mother, knowing that he was scared and defenseless. New York State Law dictates that any form of child abuse be reported to an authority and/or Child Protective Services. I reported the situation to the advisor at the organization where I was working, and realized my responsibility ended there. I knew that I could only offer my students a small amount of security and protection - and that little bit was restricted to the time I spent with them. I couldn't save them in their daily lives. I was frustrated and angry because I felt that a part of the violence of the world had made a mark on one of my students. However, "protecting" them meant reporting the incident, and taking faith in children's resiliency.

- While you may feel that you're violating their trust by disclosing information to the liaison at your workshop or to the authorities, remember that you do participants a disservice if you say nothing.

XII. HOW TO BRING IN A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE WITHOUT PEOPLE FEELING JUDGED

CHRIS G: I think the case with UE, and I've also encountered this in many other places, is not necessarily how to deal with "problems," but rather how to bring them up in the first place, in a comfortable manner, in a spirit in which no one feels that they are being ripped on. How to create a space for such conversations. Yes, I feel its important to acknowledge the good work we all do, but it is also critical to examine honestly the ways in which we work. To be open to feedback, or to just have the forum in which to provide feedback. I know that that was what our regular meetings were meant to accomplish, and in some way they were successful at it, but I think even the little time we had could have been more useful. Perhaps we just needed the training, the tools by which to evaluate our own work and that of others, and a better sense of the type of work we agreed was what we should all be doing. Maybe we needed a stronger sense of working together- teambuilding. Perhaps we were too bogged down, understandably, in other issues.

JOANNE: The skills I drew upon most are not ones I learned in a classroom. Listening attentively, empathizing, willingly sharing that which the girls were being asked to share themselves, treating them the way I would want to be treated regardless of the difference in age.

EXERCISES



Our work begins with exercises that create a level playing field, drawing on the fact that we each have a body, an imagination, experiences, and passions.

GETTING STARTED

JAN AND LORIE: What follows is a sampling of exercises that we've found particularly effective in Urban Ensemble workshops. They help build groups, warm people up, spark the imagination, generate material, and provide a sense of closure at the end of a session. We've included exercises using photography, drama, writing, and video that we invented, adapted, or borrowed from other sources. Due to our project's interdisciplinary nature, photo and video students also initiate theatre exercises, especially for warm-ups and group building. Drama students use photo and video, not just to document but also to offer participants more possibilities. And we all do a lot of writing.



When planning our very first Urban Ensemble workshop, most of our exercises were theatre-based. In order to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the project, we invented **SELF PORTRAIT WITHOUT A FACE** to serve as an introduction to each other and to photography.

SELF PORTRAIT WITHOUT A FACE

NEEDED: Polaroid cameras with flash (one for every 6-8 people) and enough film for each participant to take a photo.

Working in pairs, each person composes a self portrait of him or herself. Anything can be included in the photograph except the face. The person directing their portrait tells their photographer partner how they want to be photographed: angle, distance, cropping, etc. The pairs then sit down and tell each other the significance of their photos and something about themselves. After about ten minutes, the group leader brings the entire group together and asks everyone to show the photo of their partner and introduce him/her to the group. We have found these introductions are deeper and livelier than when people introduce themselves more conversationally.



We then ask everyone to tape their self portrait onto a large white board. Thinking of the surface of the board as the group, we ask that their placement indicate how they see themselves within the group. The image above was Urban Ensemble's response at the very beginning.

WARM-UPS

NAME GAME

Early on we played a game to learn each other's names. Each of us made a gesture and said our name preceded by an adjective with the same first initial, such as Jumping Jessica or Nasty Naomi. Our one lone older white male, a formidable fellow with a white beard, pot belly and suspenders, introduced himself as Freaky Frank. The name stuck. He henceforth was known in the group, with great affection, as Freaky Frank.



CHRIS GONZALEZ:

THE BIG WIND BLOWS

In a circle, place one fewer chairs than there are participants, including the facilitator. Everyone sits down except the facilitator who stands in center and says, "The big wind blows for everyone who..."

Ex: ...is wearing black shoes/ a cap/ sneakers
... had a healthy breakfast
...passed their last test
...has a younger brother/ sister

Everyone for whom the statement is true must change seats. The person who was standing must also sit, leaving someone else standing. That person goes to the center and calls out, "The big wind is blowing for everyone who..." completing the sentence with a different phrase. Continue for ten or so rounds. Feel the excitement of the group as to when to move on. It's best to end while they are still into the exercise and not when they begin to tire of it.

CULTURAL MAPPING

This exercise came to us from The Perseverance Theatre by way of Willa Taylor.

The facilitator begins by asking the participants to think of the room as a map and to:

Stand where you were born.

This takes some conversation so the group can agree on north, south, etc., and the extent of map necessary to contain everyone's birthplace. For one minute, everyone is instructed to talk to the people closest to them about how this birthplace contributed to who they are today. The facilitator then instructs the group:

Stand where you live now.

This is followed by a moment's conversation with those nearest.

These first two questions will lead to "dilemmas" of how the group organizes itself because, for example, some people will identify Manhattan, some New York City, as their birth or home place. Both are right and it's up to the group to choose the basis for organization. The facilitator calls out other categories, each followed by a minute or two of discussion, such as:

Group yourselves based on your age.

(Then discuss impact of age on your life.)

Make groups according to youngest, middle, oldest, only child (discuss).

What religion were you born into? And now?

What race are you?

Headings like this lead into the real fun. Some people will say they are black, some will say African American, some will say human. Here the facilitator should pose more questions:

What are the differences between certain nomenclatures?

Why do you identify with some and not others?

Other interesting questions include:

Do you have children?

What gender are you? What is your sexual orientation?

What group do you most identify with?

Then discuss what happened.

Who were you with the most? The least?

What surprised you?

Which categories did you have to think the most about?

Some of our surprises were that "Everyone connected in one category or another. . . Some things were harder to talk about than others." Comments included, "I never interacted with a white person before. . . Any one category can't tell you that much about a person. . . Talking one-on-one is important to learn about each other."

TOYA LILLARD:

STOMP/CLAP NAME GAME: Participants circle up and establish a beat with their feet. They then add hand clapping. Going around the circle, each person says their name to the beat. Everyone repeats the person's name (to the beat) EXACTLY the way that they heard it. Repeat the exercise, this time adding a physical gesture to the name. This can also be done using sounds instead of names.

CHARACTER WARM-UP: Participants begin by walking around the space, breathing in through the nose, out through the mouth. Sometimes this is a guided exercise, with the facilitator suggesting they lead with different parts of their body (as nose, hips, knees, etc.), or move as if through different kinds of environments (mud, sea water, no gravity, etc.). Or they may just choose a particular way to walk: some may limp, others may hurry, some may drag their feet. The facilitator asks them to use that walk to generate a specific character. Keeping that walk, they further define the person. Next, participants are asked to decide where they are going and why. Participants interact/greet one another as the characters that they've just created.

MUSIC/DANCE WARM-UP: The facilitator brings in a piece of music. Groups of three are made. The music is played and each group has to make up movements to the song, according to a collectively agreed-upon theme.



CONCENTRATION WHIFFLE BALL GAME

ANDREW: Someone throws a whiffle ball across the circle, and the person who catches it must throw it back across the circle to that person's left. This demands silent communication through eye contact, group cooperation, and trust. Once successful with one ball at a time, add more.



photo by JESSICA INGRAM

ANOTHER WARM-UP BY ANDREW

I asked the group to look around the circle and 'experience' each person's face. Some had trouble not mocking this task, but we eventually found some concentration. We then focused on just breath and then just the sounds we hear. There are still individuals who can't help making their own sounds for this task. I then led some basic body loosening using sound to release tension. We rolled our shoulders back and forward, and then tried one forward one back at the same time. This was followed by head rolls and dropping down through the spine. Not everyone could allow themselves to do this activity.

PHOTOGRAPHY



VISUAL ARTS WARM-UPS

LORIE: The theater warm-up has a long standing tradition in drama classes and workshops. Experiences in Urban Ensemble have made me realize that looking at and discussing the last session's photographs or contact sheets before going out to photograph or work in the darkroom function like the warm-up — a way to bring the group together and focus. The same holds true for looking at previous video footage. In the visual arts, however, we just have never called these activities warm-ups.

LORIE: Below is a list of photo exercises developed during a brainstorming session with my Community Collaborations course in the Photography Department spring 1998.

My students were teaching beginning photography workshops at Tisch to students from NYC public high schools. These assignments are meant as problem solving exercises to expand the possibilities for image making and encourage experimentation. For each assignment, use at least one roll of film.



BEGINNING PHOTOGRAPHY EXERCISES

self portraits—don't put yourself in every image
portraits—don't just take the same image over and over; show different sides of the same person
photograph your family
photograph your street
photograph a secret
photograph a dream
photograph light and motion
photograph nature

express a song
take an entire roll of film of an object such as an apple making each image as different from each other as possible
take one roll of film in an hour in one place or two rolls in two hours
make an ugly photograph of something beautiful and a beautiful image of something ugly
develop a routine, i.e. take a photograph every hour on the hour

THREE IMAGES

NAOMI: Using polaroid cameras, each group takes three images: one that expresses happiness, one anger, and one sadness. Organize the images according to the emotion and place them where everyone can see them. Most likely, the images in each group will be somewhat similar. Discuss why this may be. How can image makers use this to their advantage?

Have each group re-shoot one of the three emotions, let's say anger. Only this time they can not use a person as their subject but instead something in the room or outside. Then each group shows their new image of anger. This time the images will probably be different. Discuss why. Point out that although we may all feel sad, angry, or happy, these emotions happen in personal ways. Images can be used to express life in a general way or a more personal, private, subjective way. Which do they find more interesting? Which was harder to shoot?

HUMAN CAMERA

One person acts as a camera and their partner begins as the photographer. The camera closes "its" eyes, and is then positioned by the photographer so that when it opens its eyes, it snaps an exact image. After taking five photos, the camera tells the photographer what it took and then they switch.

OWNERSHIP

LORIE: When I started the photography program at Washington Houses Community Center in 1988, the students naturally photographed each other. After developing the film, I brought in the contact sheets and asked the students which of their photos they wanted to print. They each chose a photo of themselves. I said, "No. Choose one of your photos." They said, "We did." This went back and forth until it occurred to me that the idea of the photographer owning the image was an unknown concept to them. They owned the image because it was of them. This made me question my own assumptions. It was difficult for me to say who was more accurate.

To introduce the concept of owning the image they shot but also wanting the students to have control of and access to the images of themselves, I told them they could print the images of themselves as long as they asked the photographer for permission. We also made self-portraits. As the workshop continued and the students became attached to the photographs they took, this issue seldom came up. The photo program at Washington Houses has been thriving for ten years producing frequent photography exhibitions and books and many proud student photographers. The notion of the photographer/artist owning their images is now part of the culture of the Center.



Damien

WHCC workshop, 1989



Kareem

WHCC photo workshop, 1990

Both Kareem and Damien later went on to participate in Urban Ensemble and the photography workshops taught by Jessica in the Teen Program at WHCC.

SELF PORTRAIT EXERCISE



During my first year at WHCC, the other photography teacher, Francene Keery, introduced a very inventive self-portrait exercise. Each student poses in front of a black backdrop for a number of portraits that will later be combined in the darkroom. The student is encouraged to make different expressions, gestures, stand at the edges of the backdrop, look right, look left, etc. After the film is developed, the negatives can be easily sandwiched together since the background on the negative will be clear. This exercise not only produces many interesting images as evidenced by the photographs above and below, but also opens the way for a discussion of the complexities of self-image and identity.



WHO AM I?
HOW DO I SEE MYSELF?
HOW DO OTHERS SEE ME?

JESSICA: The participants were asked, "Who am I? How do I see myself? How do others see me?" and given time to freewrite their reactions. Then we shared and compared the responses, and took some time to analyze the discrepancies between how a person sees themselves and how others see them. Some responses to the 'who am I' question included mother, student, and a strong black woman ready to fly. It was interesting to see if people regarded themselves as their function in reality or in a more metaphorical light.



WHO AM I? composed by NATASHA ELLIS, WHCC

photo by JESSICA INGRAM



HOW OTHERS SEE ME composed by HAJA WORLEY

photo by JESSICA INGRAM

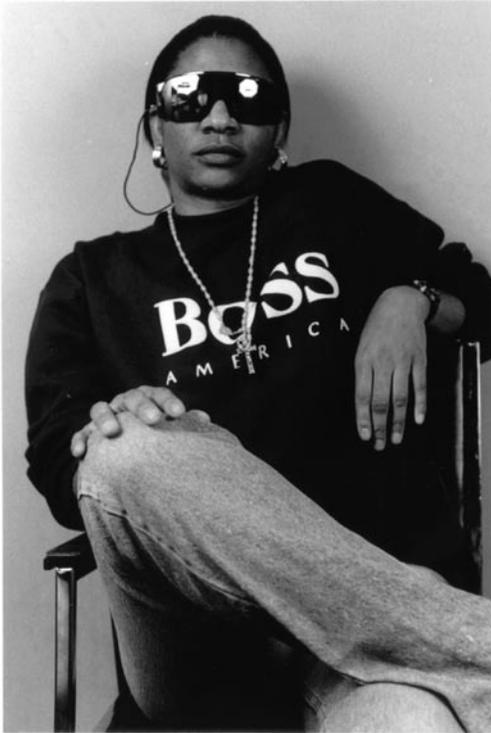
As the semester progressed, this writing exercise was incorporated into the photography section. In a studio-type setting, the group was divided into two groups. One group had the cameras and the other group was the subject. I asked these three questions, leaving time between each one. In response to 'Who am I?', the subjects would say it or act it out through their gestures or way of walking. So in essence, the people with the cameras were interviewing the others. This ended up being a powerful exercise as people loosened up and showed what they were thinking while feeling vulnerable before the camera. The camera brings a new vulnerability because it brings a watcher, whereas writing can be completely private. I think that the acting and group context really allowed people to loosen up. Also since the photographers and the subjects were walking around each person doing his/her own thing, no one felt put on the spot. The photographers worked on developing their own style and choosing their own moment since the camera was not bound by a tripod or a certain expectation of what they were supposed to be shooting. We went through all of the questions and then the groups switched roles so that everyone had a chance to shoot and everyone had a chance to answer the questions.

This exercise could also be adapted for drama and video.

WORKING WITH LARGE



LORIE: In large group workshops, incorporating photography beyond its documentary function is a challenge. One success we had was creating a make-shift photo studio with portable lights. The photography and video students took three portraits of each person. It was amazing what the sitters did with their three shots. The next week we brought back the contact sheets and each person selected one of their photos. The week after we printed the photographs leaving half the page blank and brought black pens that could write on the plastic surface of the photographs. That way each participant could add writing to their photo. The first year, we asked everyone to address the question, "What Makes Me Feel Safe?" The second year, we asked people to write about their reality for the book entitled *Variations on Dreams and Reality*.



ACQUANITTA

I Feel Safe!

1. With my Family
2. With my Counselor
3. IN Church
4. Feeding the Hungry
5. TALKING TO ANIMALS
6. UNDER COVERS ON A COLD NITE
7. When I am Full
8. When I am HAPPY
9. BEING IN LOVE
10. NEAR MY MOMMIE



My Reality

Yo What's up? My name is Rauf Wady and I'm 20 yrs of age and that's cool. Everybody always asks, "What is reality?" To me reality is school. That's right school. I want to finish school and start my own business. The flip side of this reality is I feel trapped in my own neighborhood. Where I live there is not too much support from my peers. But I'm not going to let myself get trapped because I have that support from my family. All I have to do is keep my head on straight and not let anyone keep me down. (No Doubt!!)

Peace!!
Rauf Wady

A SEQUENCE OF EXERCISES

VIS-A-VIS A PHOTO

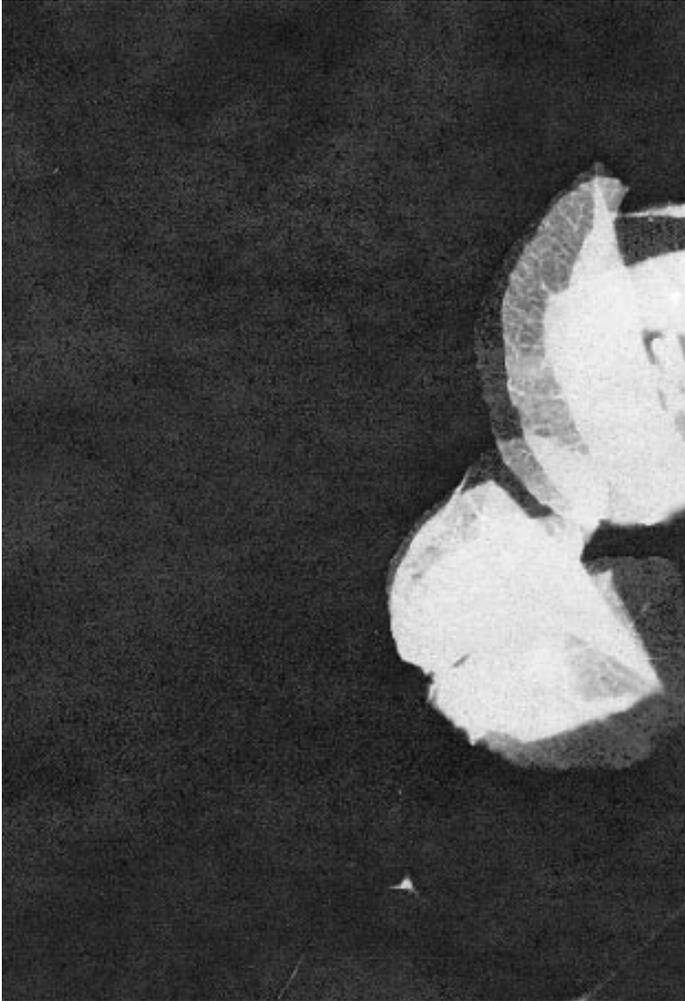
Erin Donnelly is a graduate student in Art Education and Museum Studies. As a student in the Urban Ensemble class, she designed a way to use exhibitions to explore a range of issues that could then be expanded into longer term projects.

HARLEM: THE VISION OF MORGAN AND MARVIN SMITH on view at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in the spring of 1998, showed how the artistic expression of these twin photographers has extended over a lifetime. The exhibition suggested that everything they did was in some way filtered through a creative process—photographs, paintings, journals, drawings, masks, needlework, and artifacts. For instance, when Marvin was in the Navy he kept a record of his experiences by illustrating his journal writing with watercolors.

I propose that Urban Ensemble use the exhibition to explore the themes of personal biography and creative responses to the world. Prior to visiting the exhibition, participants would meet at either the Schomburg Center or at NYU, each bringing a personal snapshot. In pairs, participants would discuss each others' snapshot, inquiring about the content of the image and its significance. Each participant would then introduce their partner's photograph to the whole group. This activity would "break the ice" and help build a sense of group, at the same time introducing the notions of biography and art, relevant to the Smiths' exhibition.

The second activity would be a group tour through the Smith exhibition. Here key works would be highlighted and group discussion solicited with regard to what they see and how it relates to the ideas of biography and creative expression. For example, in Part I of the exhibition, "Faces of Harlem," we'd focus on how the Smiths saw their neighborhood, looking at the photographs as documents of the diversity of life in Harlem in the 1930s and 40s. I'd pose general questions like: How are these street scenes like / not like the street today? How are they documents of place? What would be representative scenes of our time?

The last activity would require a second meeting. Participants would be asked to bring small objects that illustrate where they live—their home, neighborhood or community. We would make instant photograms by placing the objects on the surface of special photographic paper and exposing the compositions to light. The group would view the images and discuss how they relate to biography and sense of place. Creating instant personal still-life images would reinforce the idea of authoring personal biography through images and how that singular expression relates to the larger social environment.



ALTADENA,
cyanotype photogram,
1998
ERIN DONNELLY

The bougainvillea pressing fell out of the book I was reading. Connections to my grandmother's Victorian veranda were suddenly redrawn on the subway. Precious and personal objects stir our memories and rouse us into a deeper understanding of ourselves and where we come from.

CYANOTYPE PHOTOGRAMS

A photogram is an image formed by placing objects directly onto a sheet of light sensitive paper or film and then exposing the sheet to light. Opaque objects will block all light from hitting the paper, translucent objects will let varying amounts of light pass through them. A cyanotype is a 19th century photographic print process. To make a cyanotype photogram, objects are placed on chemically treated paper and exposed to direct sunlight (ultraviolet rays). The resulting contact print is then developed in a tray of water in the shade, and hung to dry. A rich blue (cyan) color is generated by the UV exposure of light-sensitive iron compounds (pre-treated by brushing the chemicals onto paper) while the "reserved" paper underneath the objects remains white or light blue. Architects use this process to make copies of their drawings, familiarly known as "blueprints." Ready to use Solargraphics or Alphi Super sunprint kits can be acquired at specialty stores and museums.

Making photograms in the darkroom using conventional paper and chemicals is a simple and effective way to introduce beginners to the darkroom.

VIDEO

VIDEO WORKSHOPS

CHRIS G: The belief that lots of money and resources are necessary to conduct a video workshop is an absolute fallacy. Video is a versatile medium that can be integrated into workshops in many ways. At its most bare, video requires only paper and pencils to sketch out story board ideas, and perhaps a VCR and television readily available. At its most complex, a video workshop would use a video camera and some editing equipment. The latest and most technically up-to-date technology is not required; a ten year old, ten pound VHS camera would do just fine. The important thing is the simple ability to create an image. Still photos created and placed in sequence could also work. Evaluate the needs of your workshop and be creative.

A SAMPLE VIDEO SCREENING WORKSHOP SESSION

I typically follow a certain structure for video screenings. The most important component to any screening (or workshop for that matter) is an active, strong facilitator. It is absolutely imperative that the facilitator have a clear goal for the workshop—where she wants the participants to go, what she wants them to BEGIN to think and talk about. (I stress "begin" because a facilitator can not expect to scale and solve a complex issue in the span of an hour.)

The facilitator should first explain how an exercise works and make sure that everyone is clear. Here I'll use the example of screening a clip from a video on youth gang violence.

A WARM-UP: Some quick (5 minutes or so), usually physical activities that get everyone up and alert. They also facilitate interaction among members of the workshop and begin to get them comfortable with one another. A good warm-up is Big Wind Blows (see page 40).

PRE-SCREENING EXERCISE: Usually about 10 to 15 minutes. This must relate to the theme of the video to be screened. Its purpose is to get participants to think about some of the issues or topics the video clip revolves around. See Koosh Ball Exercise to right.

SCREENING THE VIDEO CLIP: This can be presented in a number of ways. The facilitator can simply present the video clip or can be more interactive, stopping and starting the tape periodically to get feed-back. The facilitator should not feel bound to the video or compelled to present it in its entirety. Only show those parts which apply.

POST-SCREENING EXERCISE: Usually 20 minutes or so. This part of the workshop gives the participants the space to process the video—to critique the clip itself, to comment on what it proposes, to talk about issues it raised. Remember that the video is merely a tool to provoke thought; it should work for you and what you want the group to think/talk about. Break away from it if necessary. The Human Barometer exercise to the right may help get the discussion going.

CLOSURE: A quick exercise to bring the session to an end. Its purpose is to bring people back together and restore calm after the emotional heat of the workshop. For example— have everyone stand in a circle, hold hands, and say one word about, perhaps, how they felt about the workshop, what comes to their mind when they hear the word "gang," etc.

• **KOOSH BALL TOSS BRAINSTORM:** The facilitator needs a soft ball and a surface to write on. Before the workshop, the facilitator should come up with a set of five or so words that apply to the topic. In keeping with the gang topic, these might be: colors, Bloods, Crips, guns, police, Mayor Giuliani, violence, gang, brotherhood, family, etc. The facilitator has everyone stand in a circle. She calls out one of the words she has prepared and tosses the ball to one of the participants. She asks the participant to free associate off of that word, then toss the ball to someone else who will again free-associate off the original word. As the words are called out, someone should write down the responses. Allow the ball to be tossed around the circle 10-15 times, following the feeling more than the number. Then start another word. Once all the words have been called out, have the participants look at what they said. Ask them if they notice any connections among the words. What's the tone of the words? Are there any assumptions being made? As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to notice the interesting words, the stereotypes, etc. Without pointing the finger or making anyone feel uncomfortable, raise questions and try to extract what they really think about gangs.

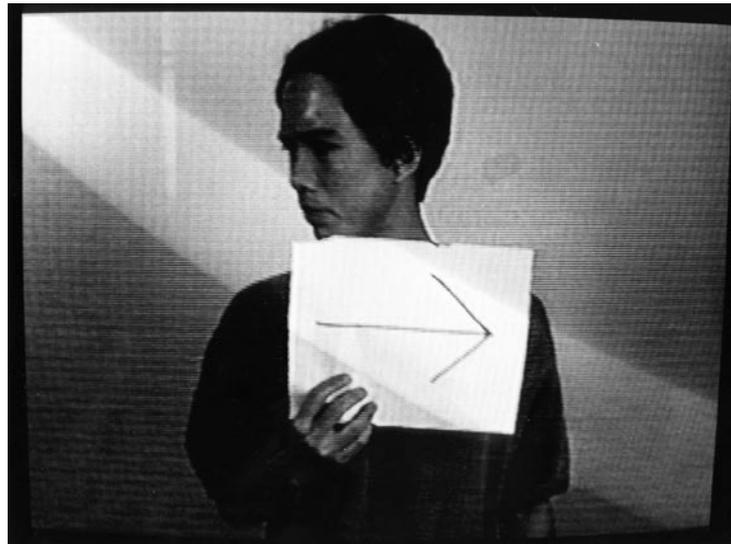
• **THE HUMAN BAROMETER:** The facilitator sets up the room like a scale. She designates one side as "agree," the center as "unsure," and the other side as "disagree." She should make these signs before the workshop to make the layout of the space clear. She also should prepare five to ten statements that relate to the topic and the video. These should be rather controversial, thought- provoking questions. For example, "Gangs tear youth apart." And, "In the video, Blank said youth join gangs because they have no strong family models. Do you agree or disagree with this?" Or, "We need more rehabilitation programs for youth to get them out of gangs." These questions are rather vague, and it is the facilitator's responsibility to see the loopholes in them. In the first statement for example, yes, gangs can cause divisions among youth, but some youth join gangs to be with other youth, a gang can be family, etc.

In the workshop, the facilitator calls out a statement and asks the participants to stand in the agree part of the room if they agree, in the unsure part if they are unsure, and the disagree part if they disagree. Noticing where everyone is placed, the facilitator asks one or two people in each section to say why they are standing there. The facilitator makes space for some conversation but not more than five minutes around any one statement to keep things moving. People may change their positions in the room so long as they explain why.

VIDEO PORTRAITS INTRODUCED BY SUSAN FINQUE



In groups of four, participants went into a room where the video camera and lights were set up. Each participant was asked to write three words describing him/herself on one or several sheets of paper. Markers, glitter, glue, and decorations were also available. Then each person stood before the camera for 20-60 seconds, holding the piece of paper in front of them. They could do anything during that time. Much to our delight, people did their own version of the exercise. For example, one person stood in front of the camera for 30 seconds with the words “Fight the power” on one hand. The other hand was clenched into a fist and held up high. Some explained their reason for choosing the three words, others sang or laughed. They could only reveal things about themselves, not anyone else. By working in fours they provided an audience for each other.



I held three pieces of paper: one said abrasive, which I ate. On a second sheet was the word mix, which I ripped in half. The third sheet said humorous, which I held upside down.—CHRIS CR

This can also be done via photography.

WRITING

JESSICA: Given the diversity of participants, we often came up with different responses to the same exercise. For example, one day we each wrote something beginning with the sentence "I'm going on a peaceful journey." Reverend Haja and my responses show that two longings may be different but the needs and background conceptions on which they are based may be the same.

I am going on a peaceful journey
Despite the broken buildings
with their gaping maws/beyond
the incessant gunfire that
jolts me awake/I have a
garden that is a sanctuary,
the garden helps me to blot
out poverty/helps me focus
helps me to understand that
we can create worlds that
must not be invaded or
abused. Ordinary normalcy can
be overcome/In
this place children discover
that vegetables don't grow
in cans, airtight and water-
packed/Hard work results in
progress and I have renewed
my connection to the Earth,
the soil.

HAJA WORLEY

I'm going on a peaceful journey
to walk down Broadway
and search for the door
somewhere unseen
to open and be free
free
free from the noise
the horns
the shouts and the scares
I want to feel a clean fresh breeze
stroll the streets at night
and be able to be unaware
lay down in the grass
feel it between my toes
get in a car
and drive to a home
be in a room
with my stuff on the walls
feel the bed that has always been mine
I'm going on a peaceful journey
walking down the street
here in New York City looking for the
unseen door to
close behind me to shut in the peace
keep the outside away
and this peace in my mind.

JESSICA INGRAM

ANDREW:

SPON-PO, AKA SPONTANEOUS POETRY

One person stands in front of the group and another gives them a first line of poetry in any style they want: rap, song, experimental, limerick. Create a poem from that first line.

FINDING A THEME

Each person writes five things that they are not allowed to do. They then select one to experience through writing.

WORDS WORK

JAVIER: I have a list of words. I call one word out and one by one the students tell me the first word that comes to their minds. I write each of their answers down. I then take about four of the responses and make a sentence. Based on this sentence, they think of situations they have been in, witnessed, or heard about.

Examples:

- I gave the word FEAR—
one reply was HOMICIDE.
- I gave the word VIOLENT—
two replies were POVERTY & RACISM.
- I gave the word APATHY—
one reply was IT'S NONE OF MY BUSINESS.



The sentence is: Homicide, racism, poverty—it's none of my business.

After they think of situations from the sentence, I give them directions to write a scene with two or more characters. I give them a relationship and ask them to give the scene a set-up, a conflict, and more than one solution. They write two to three paragraphs about the scene, and we now have the basis for a script.

(exercise inspired by Children and the Classics)

WHAT MAKES ME FEEL SAFE WRITING EXERCISE

Participants are asked to write for ten minutes answering the following questions:

- What makes me feel safe?
- What makes me feel un-safe?
- What power do I have to hold the things that make me feel safe?
- What power do I have to change the things that make me feel unsafe?

GUEST ARTIST DJANET SEARS' SONGWRITING AND POETRY EXERCISE

Participants were asked to: 1) pick a partner; 2) write for one minute about what makes you feel safe; 3) edit and discuss your writing with your partner, noting key words and constructing phrases.

Participants repeated the process twice more. The second and third time, participants wrote for two minutes. Then they edited their texts once more, shaping it into either a poem or, adding a melody (known or invented), into a song.

I feel safe when I can touch the stars
That shine so bright.
When I can see the sun with its gleaming light
I feel safe standing in my mother's womb
Held in her arms so tight
While she holds me and says everything is all
right.
With the help of him that almighty Jesus Christ
With the warmth of his hand as I kneel
On my knees praying Dear Lord would you please
Please give me that peace that I so do need
Please Dear Lord help me to be safe.

DENISE GERARD

I feel safe when:
I'm strong enough to protect myself,
I'm around my family because I
know that "they got my back."
I'm in the presence of some of my
relatives because I trust that nothing
bad can happen to me

JASON D. WALKER

In conclusion, participants were asked to pick out five words from their song/poem that that struck them, tell them to the group and then write them down. Some of the words that participants picked out were:

| | | | | |
|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------------|
| Friends | Pause | Arms | Home | Home |
| Rain | God | Around | God | Knowledge |
| Pebbles | Erase | Locks | Love | Condom |
| Dancing | Love | Doors | Real | Nappy-Dappy |
| Sunrise | Family | Pray | Sounds | of Blackness |

GUEST ARTIST REG E. GAINES' COLLECTIVE SCENE WRITING

Janice Pono, Community Affairs Associate for the Joseph Papp Public Theater and its Urban Ensemble liaison, got all of us tickets to see *Bring In Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk* at the Public. This was followed up by a workshop with the play's writer and narrator, Reg E. Gaines. Gaines began writing poetry when he saw a news report about a fifteen year old who was shot dead for a pair of Air Jordan sneakers. Out of this came the poem, "Please don't take my Air Jordans," in which he illuminates some of the issues that black youth face today.

Gaines asked everyone to write **DO NOT DISTURB** at the top of their page. Under it, he asked participants to write what they thought "do not disturb" means. From the responses a text was generated, acted out, and enjoyed by the entire group.

DO NOT DISTURB

- I see a glossy, plastic sign outside a heated, passionate hotel room.
- Don't you even try it.
- Why don' you just fuckin isolate?
- Keep outta my shit!
- Can't you see I'm tryin' to get my groove on?
- You'd better respect the privacy behind these doors.
- Stay outta my damn face.
- Stand back bitch, your shit's in flight.
- Damn it, I'm not fuckin' ready.
- Damn you awful bitch, I can't even get my shit on.
- They call me big Jumbo Jim.
- Y'all need to get y'all shit together.
- Mind your own business.
- Don't have me read you Ms. Thang.
- Kiss my ass.
- Do not dishonor me with your presence.
- Yeah, What?
- My name is Kitty Kat, stop disturbing my groove.
- Can't you understand that I just can't face you right now?
- NAH!!!

letting go

exposure

communication

commitment

inspiration

confidence

patience

strength

openness

will

rest

work

off time

brain time

BEING AN ARTIST

NAOMI: Often when we handed Urban Ensemble participants tools for expression—a camera perhaps, or a pen and notebook—they responded with hesitation saying, "But I am not an artist." This insecurity inhibited their very real ability to express themselves. In order to cross this bridge, we had to consider, expand and redefine the meaning of being an artist. After reading Sark's *Inspiration Sandwich: Stories to Inspire Our Creative Freedom*, I asked the TSOA Urban Ensemble workshop facilitators to write what being an artist means to them. Here are some of our response.

CHRIS C-R:

I used to think that being an artist meant that you had to have a permanent hole in your belly, you always had to starve. I used to think that it meant you were a shooting star and that you had to yell out your message to the globe before you burned up in the atmosphere... Now I know that all it takes to be an artist is to be infinitely big, so that you can become infinitely small, so you can jump into a person's brain directly through their eyes.

BETTY:

Having a place to explore artistic mediums, and a community context.

NAOMI:

- + find your creative projects from kindergarten, like gluing pasta to the back of a paper plate, painting it silver and placing a photograph in the middle. Display it in your house.
- + wrap a present with a brown paper bag
- + sing in the shower
- + dance in front of the mirror
- + grow a plant
- + re-arrange your furniture
- + make a dish from ingredients you've never heard of
- + wear a raincoat and carry an umbrella when it's not raining.

CHIKA:

Being unafraid, strong and confident enough to let that little seed grow and go forth.

— JESSICA

confidence to expose yourself

vulnerability

sureness

be open!

\$

not-an-artist time

politics

life

jobs

history

museums

DRAMA



As part of our attempt to introduce a range of artistic forms, **NORMA BOWLES**, a theatre artist from Los Angeles, led an immensely rich mask workshop. Ms. Bowles, who specializes in community-based theatre, brought in masks made of leather, plastic, and wood. The mask work proved effective in freeing Urban Ensemblers of their inhibitions and stretching their imaginations in the creation of characters. They felt safer to let go with their faces partially covered.

The first part of the workshop prepared us for mask work. We began with a warm-up consisting of stretches, tension-busters, and vocal exercises. Participants were then asked to create a ball of energy in their hand, which they sometimes threw, sometimes received from others. The second time they did the exercise, they released a sound as they threw and received the energy ball.

Next, in pairs, the participants improvised a scenario without words. In one scene, a man was trying to hit on a woman, and to the woman, no meant yes.

Status games provided an excellent format for issues of violence and safety. Improvisations were taken further to examine what constitutes status. For example, how does one physically communicate her/his status over another person? One may attempt to ridicule the other person's position, show physical strength over that person, etc. Participants were asked to bear that question in mind when making character choices. Volunteers were again paired up and asked to demonstrate the physicalness of status.

The status games led into pair-work in which participants were given a "1-10 dialogue" model, the vocal exchange of numbers reflecting the ascendance of conflict. By the time the second person got to ten, a boiling point had to be reached. Then the first person went back to number one with a sense of defeat. Participants were told to play to the audience to provide emphasis, and to extend their energy out.

Next, Norma asked participants to circle-up, and to imagine what it would be like to lead with one particular body part, like the nose, chin, or eyes. She asked them to imagine characteristics of a person who leads their body with that part. For example, a person who leads with their nose might be a snob; a person who leads with their chest might be a macho guy, or a flirtatious woman, etc. Participants were then asked to make an entrance and an exit leading with a body part of their choice, making a statement without words.

The second part of the session began with participants trying on the wood, leather and plastic masks and creating characters to go along with them. Norma took participants through a "Dating Game" where each "Character" in mask introduced her/him self to the group by making the entrance/statement/exit. Partners were then chosen, and each pair was asked to come up with a two minute "shtick" that demonstrated all of the techniques explored throughout the evening. The bits were hilarious, and quite innovative. 62

AUGUSTO BOAL THEATRE EXERCISES

JAN: Through his arsenal of games and exercises known as Theatre of the Oppressed, Augusto Boal has provided people the world over with tools to express their concerns and collectively solve problems. These are a few that we use.

FORUM THEATRE

Forum theatre begins with the creation and enactment of a scene in which a protagonist tries, unsuccessfully, to overcome an oppression relevant to both the actors and the particular audience. Spect-actors—so called because anyone can become a participant—are then invited to replace the protagonist at any point in the scene that they can imagine an alternative action that could lead to a solution. The scene is replayed numerous times with different interventions. This results in a dialogue about the oppression, an examination of alternatives, and a "rehearsal" for real situations.⁹

Example of a forum theatre scene from UE: A young person robs a jewelry store in order to get rent money. The robbery results in a shoot-out in which numerous people are hurt. The alternatives generated by the group featured a friend who knew about the robbery plans and either offered to loan the person money or help them find a job. The effort to imagine alternatives if the person did not have a friend with those resources led to a heated conversation about the inadequacies of the Social Service System, the break down of extended family, etc.

More far-reaching interventions occurred when Tisch students played the protagonist. Chris did a scene about feeling pressured by peers into getting into a drunk friend's car and joining in festivities. Alternatives tried out were: offering to pay for a cab, leaving the situation with other people, meeting them at the party, just not going at all. A friend of one of the students did a scene from her childhood in which a group of black girls harassed her with taunts that "the Jews killed Jesus;" intimating because she was Jewish, she killed Jesus. Alternatives there included ignoring the taunters until they gave up (which they did), fighting back, and alerting the lunch aid.

TWO GAMES

CIRCLE AND CROSS: Try to make a circle with the right finger while simultaneously making a cross with the left. Try to make a circle with the right foot and simultaneously write your name with the right finger.

BLIND TRUST: Each participant holds their arms folded at the same height in front of them. After closing their eyes, they move slowly about the space and mix themselves up. At a cue, everyone finds a partner—still with eyes closed. Next, the pairs feel each other's faces as if they were painting an image of the person's face. Once established in the

These and other games and exercises can be found in either Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*¹⁰ or *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*.¹¹

AUGUSTO BOAL'S IMAGE THEATRE

JAN: Participants get into groups of four to six and each takes a turn sculpting the group so as to reflect a certain theme, ending by placing themselves in the image. No words are used. Sculpting means to physically and gently manipulate the people into the desired characters or to have them mimic you. Share the images with the whole group, and comment first on what you physically see, then on the associations and projections that the image suggests.

A number of dynamizations take the exercise further. For example, the first image is considered the "real." Then the sculptor is asked to construct an ideal image on the same theme. Thirdly s/he sculpts a transitional image from the real to the ideal.



REAL IMAGE

JESSICA: One participant said that image theatre helped her feel more confident that she could handle bad or violent situations because she thought of alternatives before she was in the situation. In the same way, I feel prepared to continue a life filled with many people from different backgrounds and experience with whom I can find common ground.



IDEAL IMAGE



TRANSITIONAL IMAGE

PERSONALIZING HISTORY

JAN: Participants are asked to think of an historical event that has had a profound effect on their life. They then line up according to when their historical event occurred. People who chose the same event line up vertically. Next each person states the significant event, and its impact on their family and their life. This can be used as the beginning of a theatrical improvisation.



THEATRE IMPROVISATION

YOU CAN'T DO THAT HERE.

ANDREW: The first actor chooses a place and an activity. The second actor tries to get the first one to stop. Example: Arcelio was lifting weights and Janette tried to get him to leave. Arcelio decided he was in his own gym and nothing would get him to stop. Janette struggled with different strategies as I continually called out, "Find a reason to leave!" or, "Try a different strategy!" and the rest of the group yelled "C'mon, leave!" I was forced to stop the game after several minutes to talk. "Arcelio, I am going to give you the attention right now, because that seems to be what you want." [To the group:] "What you have been witnessing is what we call exhibitionism." I went on to explain how there is an issue of trust here because we want the game to move fast. One trusts the other to help them create a reason to leave if they are having trouble and vice versa if they are having trouble deciding on a reason to stay.

NATALIE MEDINA: Choose a favorite popular saying (example: Don't count your chickens before they've hatched) and build a skit that embodies it. Audience tries to guess each after skit.

Also see Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*.¹²

THE SECRET devised by CHIKA CARTER

On a piece of paper, have everyone in the group write a little-known fact or interesting secret about themselves that no one in the group would know. Make sure they fold the slips of paper up well and drop them into a little bag. Shake up the bag and let each person choose one. Make sure no one has her own. Then have one person read the secret she chose. Everyone guess whose it is. That person goes next and so on.

This is a good exercise for people who think they know each other pretty well. Assumptions about each other will probably have been made and this game can reveal them and shed new light on each other.

CLOSURES

Stand in a circle. Each person says one word or thing most memorable from the day's workshop.

Standing or sitting, everyone says one word characterizing your experience in this workshop.

PEBBLES: Participants are asked to close their eyes and imagine themselves in a peaceful place where there is a pond. Every spoken word acts as a pebble in the pond. Participants are then asked to add their "pebble" into everyone else's pond, i.e. speak a word, when they feel the facilitator's touch on their shoulder. —JAVIER

MUSICAL CLOSING: A beat is established, and participants sing, harmonize, dance, and recite lyrics over the beat. —HAJA

The phrase "community service" does not accurately describe the nature of artistic field work like Urban Ensemble. It brings to mind activities like serving meals in a soup kitchen which, while important, are entirely different. The soup server is on one side of a counter, the soup receiver on the other. In Urban Ensemble there is no counter: while acknowledging the skills we bring, we're all in it together.

PRODUCTION



Multimedia moment in our first Urban Ensemble performance, 1996

"Truth requires a maximum effort to see through the eyes of strangers."
—TAYLOR BRANCH ¹⁴

LIFE CHANGE BY REST OF ILLUSION

**Today a bullet can hit
you from any range
Life change
We went from smellin
cotton trees to smellin a
fresh breeze from the mountain
from being called niggers
and drinkin out of labeled
fountains. Life change
We went from wearin' bell bottoms to
wearin Guess from listening to
Grand Master Flash to listening to Meth.
cause
Life Change. We went from drinkin'
Hi-C to drinkin' 40s people try
to preach but it's just bore-d
I'm not tryin' to tell you what to do
But I want to get in your brain
just to wake you up in life
and show you that Life Change.**

LIFE CHANGE by Urban Ensemble participant Tarik Warley inspired the title of the first year's theatrical production.

FIRST YEAR PERFORMANCE

JAN: We've considered numerous models for our final performances. The first year reflected our collaborators from professional theatres. George Wolfe, artistic director of the Public Theater, favored taking the Urban Ensemblers' writing and having famous actors associated with the Public perform it. But the participants wanted to perform their own material. Willa Taylor from Lincoln Center appreciated the participants' desire but still prioritized production values. She felt that we needed to perform in a real theatre, but all of Lincoln Center and the Public's stages were booked. We ended up in a Tisch Theatre Department space, along with simple stage lights and sound equipment.



First year final performance, May 1996

photo by Lorie Novak

Willa hired a professional director, Susan Finque, who had experience with community-based art. Susan rehearsed with us once a week for the final month and a half. But the participants didn't know her and at first, didn't trust her. It was nothing personal. She just hadn't been on the journey with them and they were resistant to putting themselves in her hands. Nevertheless, by the time we performed, most of us were grateful to Susan for taking the material to performance level.

YEAR 2: VARIATIONS ON DREAMS AND REALITY

During the first semester of the second year we strengthened workshops at individual sites. For the second semester we co-ordinated our efforts in our large weekly sessions as follows:

JESSICA: The themes for the second semester of the second year, *Variations on Dreams and Reality*, evolved from my desire to have a more peaceful and manageable Urban Ensemble experience. The first year, though wonderful and productive, needed some revisions, as all beginnings do. I came up with an over-arching idea for the whole semester, to which the whole group agreed.

I conceived of the semester as a book with three chapters: 1) Dreams—what we want; 2) Reality—what we have; 3) Transition—how to get from our reality to our dreams. Participants would work, for three weeks each, in a drama, photo or video group. The theme of all the groups for the first three weeks was dreams. On week #4, the groups showed their works-in-progress to each other. Then people changed to a different medium and spent the next three weeks creating photos, video footage, and theatre scenes about their reality. The next week, they again shared their work. The third three-week section was on the subject of transition from those realities to those dreams. Thus accomplishments were cumulatively built up. We then spent two weeks putting together and rehearsing the play, editing the video, printing photographs, and making the book. We were much less hectic than the first year, and it was interesting to have the same themes running through



Jasmine's Dream, 1997

JAN: The director of the final production the second year was Toya Lillard, UE field co-ordinator and a graduate student who has done theatre since she was a child. Everyone was more comfortable and more willing, and the show was an organic extension of the work we'd been doing all year. It was also a more modest production, without a stage, props, special lights or sound.

Our core goal, both years, was that the participants experience a sense of pride and ownership of their art work, and that we help them communicate effectively to an audience. The "real theatre" model of the first year has merits; as does the more modest production of the second year, which may have signalled an audience to attune their expectations to a simpler, but not less moving, production.

SECOND YEAR PERFORMANCE

TOYA: We cut, pasted, and developed texts that came out of writing exercises (i.e., Who Am I?, What Makes Me Feel Safe?, Dream/Reality) so that they could be performed, rapped, or sung. We also included material from elsewhere. Some participants simply recited their parts, others performed in character. For example, Delores from Project Greenhope did an excerpt of Nelson Mandela's Inaugural Address. To remove the notion of "Delores playing Delores" from her mind, I asked her what type of person would make such a speech. She said someone strong, forceful, and convincing. I asked her to improvise being that type of person, to figure out why she was making that speech and to whom she was speaking. These are basic techniques of character creation that help the performer establish location and motivation. I used these same techniques when working with Tarik and Kareem on the rhymes that they wrote but were mortified to perform.

The blocking reflected transitions in thought and motivation; moreover, it helped the participants reflect what was desired for clear distinctions between scenes that were "real" and those that were dreams. A lot of the blocking looked like dancing because we wanted the movement to complement the words, and every performer had a distinct rhythm in the delivery of her/his lines. Other performers created little worlds around the person/s featured in each scene, like back-up singers in a pop music concert. For example, when Delores declared, "Our deepest fear is NOT that we're inadequate," the other performers adopted a stance of defiance.

Music was very important to the performers and supported the action of the scenes. We used everything from Erykah Badu and Curtis Mayfield to the hip hop stylings of Kareem and Tarik. Performance of the play was preceded by a photo exhibition and a video screening, all grounded in



Excerpts from Second Year Performance, photos by Jessica Ingram

LORIE: This book is the fourth that Urban Ensemble has produced. Books have been a way to capture the spirit of what has transpired during our workshops. We have an important document of our experience and each participant has something concrete to take away with them. Let us also not overlook what great fundraising tools they are. Our books have been made simply. We tape photos to the page and use our local photo copy store as our printer. For this book, Jan and I have consulted with the original Urban Ensemble NYU students for their design and editing ideas. It is the first one created entirely in the computer. (Thanks to Naomi for all the scanning.)

When I teach bookmaking, I encourage students to think of the book as the art form rather than second best to actual prints or a performance. I urge them to experiment. A book is not just photographs and writings put together. It has to have a concept and sequence so that you are carried through the book.

**TEXT
AS IMAGE** *DOES THE TYPEFACE*
SCREAM *echo* or does it whisper?
Maybe you want the personalized touch of handwriting?

Or do you want the traditional look of a serif font such as A Garamond that we are using? Or do you prefer a sans serif font such as Gill Sans, the other font we use throughout the book?

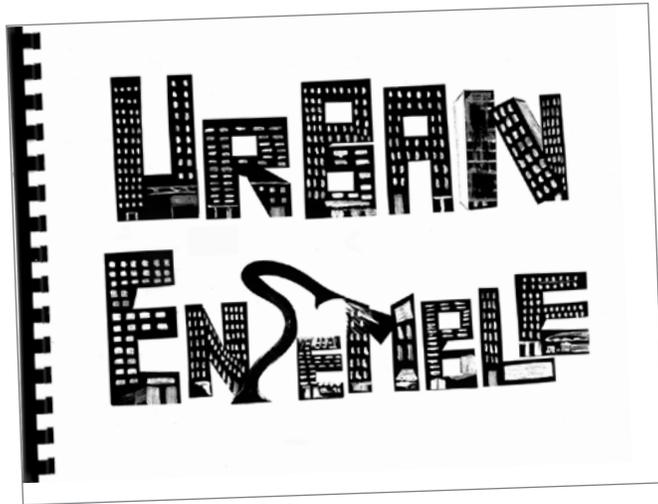
And what about **size?**

The spacing between lines also makes a difference.
The spacing between lines also makes a difference.
The spacing between lines also makes a difference.
The spacing between lines also makes a difference.

THE DOUBLE PAGE SPREAD IS A STAGE

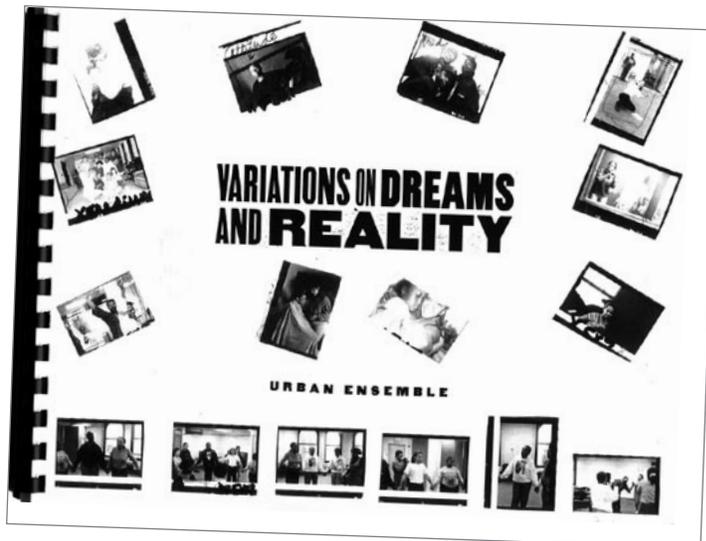
The book is a time-based medium with a beginning, middle and end. Pacing is crucial. A blank page is not just empty space but a breath—two empty pages a deep breath. Think of the double page spread as a stage. How to dynamically fill the page with text and image becomes the challenge.

In all our Urban Ensemble books, we have stressed inclusiveness by trying not only to incorporate writings by and images of as many participants as possible, but also to include anyone interested in creating the book itself. The books use a range of fonts to convey the sound of the many voices in Urban Ensemble. Whenever possible, we ask people to choose the font for their own writing.



The cover for the first year's book (left) was conceived and painted by James Terrell, one of the community participants.

During the second year, I was on sabbatical and Jessica Ingram took over the book direction. As she described earlier in this book, *Variations on Dreams and Reality* was based on the conception for the entire semester and participants were even more involved with the sequencing and book design than during the first year.

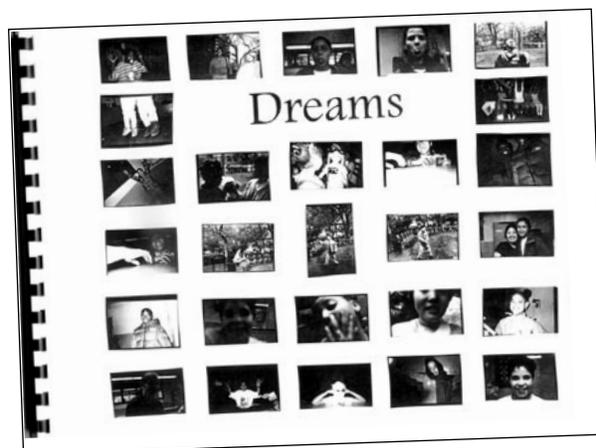


To learn more about creating visual books and the tradition of artists books, I suggest reading *The Structure of the Visual Book* and *Non-Adhesive Book Binding* by Keith Smith¹⁵ and *A Century of Artists Books* by Johanna Drucker.¹⁶ Children's books are also great inspirations for bookmaking ideas.

YEAR THREE

The third year represented a major shift in Urban Ensemble. The University terminated its AmeriCorps contract, thus ending the ten hour a week violence reduction program that we three faculty had been carrying out with ten hand-picked undergrads and one grad student. Building on Urban Ensemble's momentum, we took the opportunity to open it up to all Tisch students by redesigning UE as a course. Imbedding it in the curriculum also protected both students and faculty from the likelihood of burnout, had we continued at the earlier pace. Specifically, UE students undertook the following projects:

Malia Matooka and Lauren Morgan, UE interns working at WHCC, assisted Jessica Ingram in a school-age photography workshop. Together, they created a photo book called *Dreams*. Also at WHCC, UE intern Erin Donnelly and Chris Chan Roberson conducted a process oriented workshop for teens using drama, video, and creative writing.



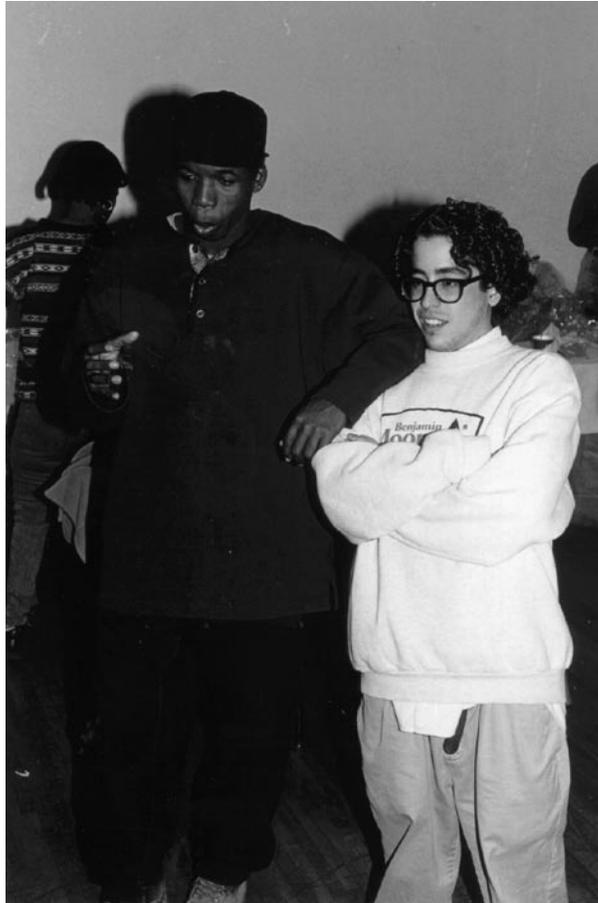
Toya Lillard and film producer Anna Reinhart co-directed *Middle School Stories* at the School for the Physical City. With the help of UE interns Melissa Berger and Louisa Heyward and video assistance by Chika Carter and Betty Yu, 7th and 8th graders made videos featuring adolescent protagonists in roles they do not see in mainstream media.

The two *Children and the Classics* projects with which UE interns Ashley Conrad and Jessica Rotondi assisted ended with final productions. The *Groove With Me* workshop was co-directed by UE class member Courtney Morris with assistance by UE intern Joanne Ruelos. Their final performance was an exploration of culture and identity through dance, words, and video.

JOANNE: How the final product was presented and where it was presented must be as representative of the community as the content of the video itself.

I realized once I started asking, "Did we get that on video?" and almost discounting the activity if we hadn't, how important it is to regularly check in with your priorities.

REFLECTION



Central to community-based art making is a focus on what you do with who and what you have. The actors are not professionals, the lights are not likos and fresnels, the space is not an acoustically marvelous theatre. But we can embrace who the people are and what moves them; we can work with available resources, be they flashlights or candle light; we can perform in their community's meeting place be it a community garden or a transformed school cafeteria. Confirming that art, true to its etymology, as our colleague Carlos de Jesus pointed out, really is about how the pieces fit together. We find the same "ar" root in ARmy, ARithmetic and hARmony; fitting together numbers, people, or sounds. Perhaps the concept of "fit" is a clue to the assessment of community-based arts projects—learning to use the diverse people and resources that are present to come together rather than to pull apart.



photo by Natasha Ellis from WHCC photo workshop

THE QUESTION OF ASSESSMENT

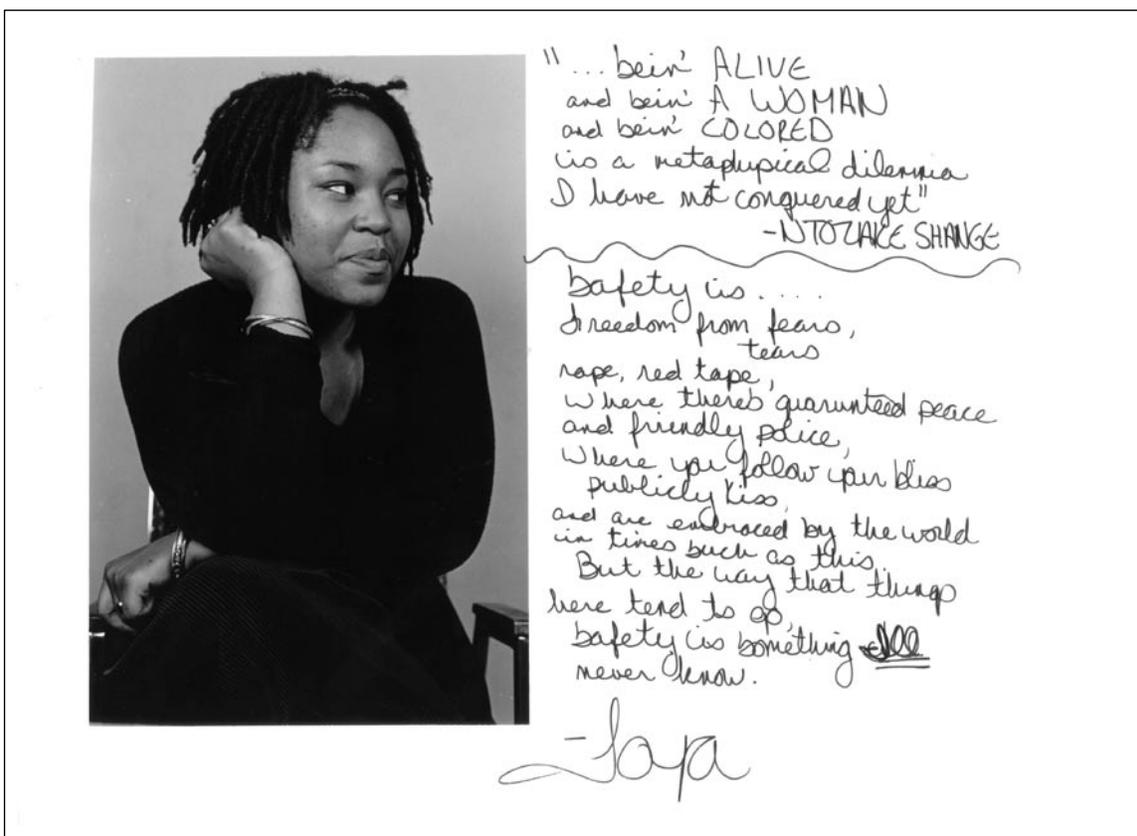
JAN: The proof of the pudding, as Brecht would say, is this: Have we left something behind that can continue without us? Sometimes we can easily answer yes. Working independently, Tisch Interactive Telecommunications student Michelle Hansell raised the money to install a bank of computers at Harlem School of the Arts. She taught staff people how to compose on a music notation program, leaving something of great usefulness behind that can obviously continue without her.

Not all community arts projects can be assessed so concretely. Lorie and Jessica have helped make photo classes a part of the culture at WHCC. Haja and I are developing a UE supported theatre piece and photo essay to support Project Harmony's community gardens, on the mayor's list for demolition. SPC's photo classes include Photography Department interns, and three of their humanity classes this year feature Drama Department interns helping the students bring to life the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti, family stories of immigration, and projects for a course entitled On Being Human.

In most cases, the difference a project makes in someone's life is neither easily attributed to just that project nor immediately evident. Desired goals—such as violence or prejudice reduction, development of critical skills, deepened perceptions, broadened sense of life options—are the result of many factors. What people might have done without such activities will never be known. And art's ephemeral nature, existing as what Lewis Hyde calls a "gift," further increases the difficulty of assessing most arts projects in whatever the context.

Narrative description is one of the tools that people in the arts use to try to capture the metaphysical nature of artistic experience. What follows are testimonies suggesting what the workshops meant in some of the participants' lives.

PARTICIPANT TESTIMONIES



DIFFERENCES AND COMMON GROUND

TOYA: I was always drawn to the women from Project Greenhope, because for me, they brought new meaning to the cliché, "There but for the grace of God, go I." It was easy for me to assume commonalities between myself and the women; being a woman, being of color, having grown up poor, having had an unstable family environment. I looked at Delores and Goldie as my older aunts that I never got to meet, and Renee reminded me so much of my own mother that I found myself sometimes answering her with, "Yes ma'am," which she didn't like because she said it made her feel old. Of course there were obvious differences, like the fact that they had recently left Riker's Island Prison, and I had recently left Vassar College. But it's harder to see difference when you basically look and talk the same way.

It got easier to see when I spent three weeks going up to Greenhope everyday, sometimes twice a day depending on their availability, to direct *Variations on Dreams and Reality*, the theatre component of our final presentation the second year. The first week, I found myself spending just as much time hearing about their children, lovers, families, and drug dependency as I did rehearsing with them. As a twenty three year old from Houston, Texas, who had no children and had never been to jail, it was not only intelligent, but necessary for me to do more listening than anything else. One woman named Yolonda told me in explicit detail about the differences between her male and female lovers. Delores shared the secrets

of maintaining her figure after having her kids. Renee reminded me that she has a daughter my age, and the other women helped me to understand who had relapsed and why. I soon began to realize that our sameness was very limited. I suddenly felt like an interloper, like one of those kids in college who I used to make fun of for being so gung-ho about service, but who were afraid to go into Poughkeepsie after dark.

They needed to get to know me more, too. They asked me all of the questions that I had asked them: Who am I? How do I see myself? How do others see me? They listened to my stories as eagerly as I had listened to theirs. It allowed them to see me as I had so many times seen them: vulnerable, scared, not knowing what happens next. It amazed me that they respected me, and liked my "country accent." Of course I had to thicken my skin to the occasional biting comment ("Damn, Toya, you getting FAT"), and the periodic refusal to participate ("Laura's having a bad day, she ain't comin"). I learned that sameness and difference are the most subjective of concepts. That within sameness, there can be differences so far and wide.

By the third week, I started going up a little earlier, so that I could have lunch with the women. I must say that those women were SERIOUS cooks, too. Goldie's spaghetti is to die for. During lunch, we would talk about hair (they loved to touch my locks and compare notes), how hard it is to get clean, how hard it is to stay clean. And how special they thought it was that I was getting my master's degree. I started to go back to that feeling of familiarity again; Delores and Goldie became my aunts, and I slipped up and said, "Yes ma'am" to Renee. That week, they showed me their rooms, pictures of their kids, and gifts given to them by loved ones. It was like we had come full circle, and now we could truly enjoy and understand the value in sameness, and the importance of recognizing difference.



photo by JESSICA INGRAM

JOANNE: In the midst of doing a video portrait, one girl said there was no such thing as racism where she lives because everyone in her environment is Latino. It opened my eyes to one of the confines of "community."



Reality - Mankind's explanation for the unexplainable. Our interpretation of our surroundings, tainted by perception. The awakening of one's mind through fear, angst, and joy. Reality is as we are; We are our own reality.

"Friede Auf Erden"

I am not you.
You are not me.
Do not judge me
You do not know me

Love :Hate:: Life :Death

Embrace, Enjoy... Fade away...

Dylan Page



Self Portrait with Natasha and Nicole from WHCC

Jessica Ingram 1996

JESSICA: When I started AmeriCorps as a freshman, new to the city, relatively inexperienced, I began working with formerly incarcerated women from Project Greenhope in East Harlem. I did not feel prepared for the encounters that I was having with them. Some of the exercises we did entailed sharing personal stories with one another. When I heard what they had been through in their lives, I did not feel that my story was as important or meaningful. I also felt that we would not be able to relate to one another. In one exercise, for example, we wrote about an image of Charlie Chaplin. I responded to the picture casually. He was a comedian that I did not know very much about and he looked a little scary. Vicki, a Greenhope participant, said she did not like the image because it reminded her of the days when she was strung out on crack.

Eventually, I shared my feelings and insecurities with some of the women that I was getting close to. They encouraged me to be open with them because they really wanted to know me. They were committed to me just as I was committed to them. For us to grow, I had to be involved. Opening up, whether my stories were as dramatic as theirs or not, made them feel more comfortable. Just as most of them had never made art, I had never acted and many of the warm-up exercises made me feel uncomfortable. However, we were all in this together. We all wanted to welcome this new experience of trying things that we had never done before. We all went out on a limb in hopes of reaping the benefits, which we did.

The most important lesson I learned is not to be scared of differences. I made some great relationships that first year and learned about others and myself. The Greenhope women encouraged me to be thankful that I had not gone through what they had, and to also acknowledge how my experiences had impacted my life. Many of our stories contained common threads—love, control, fear, weakness, and wanting to triumph, but not being sure how. We connected along these lines, even though the details of our experiences were not the same. I feel that all of the participants together represent life, all sides, shapes, and forms of it, and this we were willing to share.



photo by Maria Rodriguez, YALA photography workshop

PRIDE

JAVIER: After several years teaching through Children and the Classics, I taught alone for the first time at Young Adult Learning Academy (YALA). My students were thirteen black and Latino, 19-25 year olds, who knew more about the streets and life than I could ever imagine.

Art is an incredible teaching tool because it never really feels like school. The students were immediately motivated by the fact that there were no desks to sit behind but rather an open floor, and an instructor with no shoes on who accepted whatever participation they felt like at any moment. The relaxed environment put them at ease. One person's energy was contagious and regularly spread to the whole group. They learned how to stay in a moment, speak loud, and work off one another because the fun of it let them commit to the project and learn these skills. As necessary as the creation of lesson plans are, many went out the window because what my students needed on a given day was more important than what I had planned.

These young men and women came to me for advice about their futures as well as guidance through the class. The group got so close and connected that we felt like we could do anything in front of each other. That is something that the instructor must work damn hard to create. I brought in my poetry to share, participated in every exercise, and offered them a place where anything they said and did was respected. They were uncensored in this room as long as there was respect for each other's bodies and no malicious comments. Opinions were always respected as long as they were presented non-confrontationally. "I think you need to work on that moment where..." is much more constructive a comment than "That sucked when you did..." I accepted their criticism when they didn't understand what I was asking them to do or when an exercise made them feel uncomfortable. One young woman couldn't handle the freedom and openness and transferred out.

No one realized that they were working their butts off until near the end, when they saw that all the games and fun were leading to a performance. The show, while not perfect, was definitely a hit. The young men and women were hugging each other and laughing and full of pride. The experience gave them a sense of accomplishment that hopefully fed into the rest of their lives, providing a sense of strength to do what was right for them. It's a wish I have for all the students that I teach. I know I can't change their lives but I can set up a great experience that will help them find a way to make changes. To think that two months before that day they were as cold, hard and tough as any street kid you can meet. In the end they were an ensemble who cared about the work and thus themselves and each other. Art won them over, gave them strength and courage, and for a moment gave them a self love, a high that was better than the high on the street: Pride.

CHANGE

ANDREW: I ended the WHCC summer street theatre workshop with mixed feelings. I certainly learned a lot, but the group never achieved what I had dreamed. Only once could I get them to do our workshop outside and that scared several members from coming back. How could I accurately assess the experience? I did overcome some major personal obstacles. I successfully taught important principles about my craft, learning more about it in the process, increased my confidence leading a group long-term, broke down a major cultural barrier. Moreover, I always forget that my presence at Washington Houses helped that community. I gave them many gifts that went beyond the content of the class. No, they didn't perform a big show for lots of people. But work that happened in our private space became like a rehearsal for life. Those moments when a participant took a risk and pretended to be someone different or to make a silly gesture could set off a chain reaction to take a bigger chance for improvement in the rest of their lives.

Toya helped me see that I was a role model in breaking down social barriers. The more time they spent with me, the more comfortable and trusting they became. We got past our stereotypes, let our guards drop just enough to be with each other and learn from each other. One of Urban Ensemble's core members, Haja Worley, said to me that I'm just planting seeds and that I have to resign myself to accepting whatever positive results we are

CONNECTIONS

A number of the African Americans in our group, including among the NYU students, had been raised by single mothers. The presence of a strong and giving black man was downright healing to them. As Toya Lillard wrote, "Reverend Haja speaks often about the importance of mentoring and bearing witness; he believes that young people learn best by example, and that if there are enough people to nurture their growth, they are more likely to thrive. I am a testament to that idea, and projects like Urban Ensemble, that help many of us locate ourselves, is proof that the theory holds true."



photograph from Project Harmony/Morningside Park photography workshop, summer 1996

MARY MOLLY GIBEAU: Eleven years ago, I entered the NYU Tisch Drama Department with great aspirations of becoming an actress. The professional component of my coursework was at the Stella Adler Conservatory. I was thrilled at the prospect of learning how to speak and getting into the emotional textures of the classics. Once in the program however, I wasn't sure if being an actress was what I wanted. I felt intimidated by tough, critical studio teachers and also by incredibly adventurous peers. I didn't feel the least bit adventurous, nor did I feel qualified, as my acting teacher Mario Siletti recommended, "to bring my greatest fears to the stage and face them." I found it impossible to bring any life experience to the stage as my privileged suburban life had only been 18 years long, and not that difficult. I needed some life experience under my belt.

Now, seven years after graduating, I see that experiences I had at Tisch prepared me in unforeseen ways for my present life work, the pursuit of a masters in social work. Especially helpful was a theatre internship with Creative Alternatives of New York, a program that conducts theatre workshops with institutionalized people. I assisted a workshop at a

psychiatric ward for older people at Mount Sinai. This experience gave me a unique opportunity to interact with the mentally ill in a non-threatening, therapeutic way. I learned about the mental health system and treatment teams. The actors who led the workshops wrote up reports about each session and reported to the patients' psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers about their expressiveness in the sessions. My stereotypes of the mentally ill were challenged. I related to them as a peer, a workshop member, and understood their fears and empathized with them.

During one workshop, a middle-aged woman, who had had a partial lobotomy many years earlier, shared that she did not want to participate in one particular exercise because she was afraid that people would laugh at her and not like her. Tears gently slid down her cheeks. She expressed such deep emotion and one I, too, had felt many times in acting class. I reached out and touched her hand lightly and said, "I am afraid sometimes, too. It can be very frightening to share yourself with other people. Let's do it together." In social work we call that the skill of joining. I joined to the woman's feeling, also offering to do it with her, to give her support and show her that she could overcome that fear. In social work we would say that the woman's transference was about looking for a mother figure, someone to encourage her and give her the strength to participate, to make it safe for her to participate. I rose to the occasion.

Finally, this was a school experience that felt right to me. Helping this woman participate in this one theatre exercise in a locked ward at Mount Sinai felt more meaningful to me than acting in a play ever could. I led some exercises as I became more comfortable with the patients and the other actors running the groups.

Today, in social work, I hunger to run groups. They are my preferred modality and what I have requested for my final year internship. In the collaborative work I have done with my clients this past year through case management, I have tried to employ empathy, sensitivity and emotional self-awareness. And I have finally begun to face my fears in my work as Mario wanted me to eleven years ago, although my work is no longer on the stage. I hope to bring the arts into my practice of social work as it unfolds.

JAVIER: When I'm in a room with ten to thirty students, engaging them, exciting them to show parts of themselves that are stifled by their school, home, neighborhood, peers, or by television—there is nothing in this world more thrilling. In an hour and a half, twice a week, I can spark a change in a young person's life to do or be better than they usually allow themselves or are given the chance. That's worth all the hard, exhausting, and even draining work.

THOUGHTS ON COMMUNITY

HAJA WORLEY, DIRECTOR, PROJECT HARMONY: As a member of the Ensemble, I have experienced an opportunity to bring my observations as a minister, artist, and older adult to a place predominately populated by the young. I am honored to be part of Urban Ensemble. It is my prayer that the Ensemble will continue to grow and continue to speak out, reach out, teach and work with the multinational, intergenerational peoples who are its members and its audience.

JAN: Community is a notoriously slippery term for which I have several touchstones. Anthony Cohen defines community as "a system of values, norms and moral codes that provide a sense of identity."¹⁷ Kathie de Nobriga thinks of it in much more face-to-face terms: "For me, living in small towns most of my life, community means those people who would call to see if I was okay if my car hadn't moved in three days, or those people I had to face in the grocery store after I had done something particularly lame-brained."¹⁸ The Nazis delimited the German community in terms of Aryan culture; it's important to remember that community brings people in and leaves people out. Wendell Berry's understanding of culture evokes agriculture to underline the environment in which we grow: the nature of the soil, weather conditions, rainfall, and the surrounding habitat that forms us into certain shapes rather than others.¹⁹ Metaphors for factors that might also be seen as one's community.

Our work is community-based in a number of senses. Urban Ensemble is in partnership with organizations that share our commitment to art. The students themselves compose a community, just as surely as do the teens at Washington Houses or the elders at American Indian Community House. Although there are differences within these groups, each has a somewhat related "system of values, norms and moral code that provides a sense of identity." Bringing these varied community groups together operates like a law of physics: something will occur by having them rub up against each other.

Urban Ensemble aspires to behave like a community in Victor Turner's sense of *communitas*, i.e. a profound sense of human connection with minimal hierarchical imposition.²⁰ While clearly the leaders of the project, Lorie and I try hard to listen to what the students tell us, who try hard to listen to what the participants tell them. While acknowledging different levels of artistic technique and institutional responsibility, we try not to be oppressively top-down.

"Community art" indicates that our focus is not the student artists digging inside themselves to arrive at self-expression but rather creating circumstances to facilitate the artistic expression of others. These "others" come to Urban Ensemble as part of communities based on age, race, nationality, spirit and circumstance. But all are people left out of conventional art-making experience. Of course the way that Jasmine does her Greenhope colleagues' hair is artful. Haja's approach to community gardening, exquisitely laid out and bringing in neighbors young and old, is artful. Tarik and Kareem's improvised rap poetry is artful.

The paradox is that by removing themselves from the spotlight and focusing on others, our students frequently find themselves and their subjects, to which this book bears witness. Julia Ballerini counsels artists to watch that their attraction to community-based work not be "a cover through which to replay ambivalent desires and fears that were once part of colonial conquest: the romance of the untamed and uncivilized; the focus on people 'close to the earth,' ignoring cycles of poverty and despair." Politically, watch that our activities not inadvertently, "shift responsibility for those in need away from the government."²¹ Be vigilant that the art created does not represent dire situations as picturesque. When I co-facilitated the prison drama workshop, the men made powerful theatre. But they were against making a video of it, as that might look like fun and games at Trenton State Prison. We must also guard against force feeding dominant aesthetics to people we work with; do we in fact perceive them as having no culture of their own? What standards do we apply in these activities? Are we insecure about our own art?

As facilitators, we are often not of the community in which we work. Some people believe that one can only contribute in meaningful ways via long-term commitment to the community in which one lives. As Lucy Lippard dryly stated, "One can not drop in to a community and make social change."²² On the other hand there is a particular value in being committed outsiders: partly by virtue of being from the great beyond, can one instigate what educator Susan Ingalls calls the Key Positive Experience (see page 26). The potential power of people coming from outside the community was voiced by Barbara Santos, who has worked with Augusto Boal for the past eight years. As she stated at a recent conference on Theatre and Development, "Of course communities want outsiders who bring fresh resources coming in! You don't have to be ashamed to come from the outside. That's what gives you access to things they need!" In the case of Urban Ensemble, the responsibility for continuity rests on the faculty guides.



Safety is belonging to a community.
knowing that you have somewhere
to go.

Violence is more than someone
physically hurting me but someone
stereotyping, someone denying
access because of race, gender,
sexuality or class.

Safety is being able to breathe
freely.

Violence exists in many forms.

Janice Pano

ANDREW: Urban Ensemble transformed my life forever. The mission alone inspired me to do more with the art I was studying—to take on the social responsibility of an artist. Art became a tool and the time with Urban Ensemble became a process of finding more functions of my art. I found out how art could bring people of any background together, a universal language. Art became a teaching tool for students of all ages. Art inspires and empowers others to experience, believe, and achieve things they might never had without it. Art Heals!

I was also transformed because of my mentors in Urban Ensemble. I was given responsibilities, trust, and priceless guidance. I left Urban Ensemble hungry for more knowledge, more growth, and more experiences. I feel blessed that Urban Ensemble was a part of my life. I learned so much about myself, who I want to be, and how I interrelate with others. In essence, Urban Ensemble transformed how I behaved in the world: really looking, hearing, and feeling with everything I interact with. I am now an ambassador to the world for Art's sake!



photo by JESSICA INGRAM

STUDENT RESPONSES
URBAN ENSEMBLE CLASS SPRING 1998

WHAT IS ONE THING YOU LEARNED FROM YOUR INTERNSHIP?

I didn't know I could teach.

I didn't know how much raw potential these kids had;
just give them the tools.

I didn't know how effected kids are by everything you do.

I didn't know what extremes there would be: some days so
awful and chaotic, other days so extraordinary and creative.

I felt at the same level as the group; very helpful for me to be
in a setting with such encouragement, no judgement.

I was surprised by how much the multi-disciplinary stuff
(writing, theatre, video, photo) helped in a dance workshop.

Every kid could find something she was good at.

Importance of making a syllabus and then letting go based on
what the group actually did; trusting the process.

Visit at least one other site.

How much of a difference it makes if you miss a session:
you are missed!

Energy it gives to the rest of your life. Contact with a
different world.

Feeling your life has meaning.

How much violence permeates young people's lives.

How much can happen in even a very short workshop.

How much you gotta love what you do.

How knowing yourself nurtures your teaching and your
teaching nurtures knowing yourself.

THE COMMUNITY-BASED ARTS WORKSHOP, FROM SOUP TO NUTS

JAN COHEN-CRUZ AND LORIE NOVAK

Although each situation is full of variations, here are some key considerations when setting up an arts workshop with non-professionals:

I. PRELUDE / SETTING UP

(before workshop starts)

- Goals: be clear about what kind of work you want to do?
- Choose where to work; when possible, build on connections you have.
- Make no assumptions about the place, the people, everyone's expectations or ways of working.
- Visit the site.
- Find out about the population, the neighborhood, and the organization.
- Set it up administratively and identify an effective person with whom to liaison.
- Find out particular rules such as possible limitations on physical contact with the people you are working with.
- Ascertain how your participation will help the organization carry out its mission.
- Confirm availability of appropriate classroom, storage, necessary materials, and equipment.
- Make sure to work out a budget.
- Generate interest (recruitment)—is the organization responsible or are you?
- Make a schedule and assess time commitment required of facilitators and participants.

II. BEGINNINGS

- Feel out the place and people; assess their level vis-a-vis the art form.
- Provide ways for them to feel you out.
- Warm-up: for what? For whom? Activities and conversation topics.
- Build the group.
- Build trust.
- Balance between doing your thing and taking in their desires.

III. THE BODY OF THE WORKSHOP

- Establish a workshop structure/routine.
For example, each session could contain warm-up, main activity/ies, closure.
- Plan well but be ready to change plans on a dime.
- What is the structure of entire project? How much time is needed to build it?
- Build skills and level of engagement.

IV. FROM PROCESS TO PRODUCT

- Is it preferable to shift to production mode and at what point?
- Assess what can be produced: goals vis-a-vis the participants, you, the place.
Who is the intended audience?
- Determine the sorts of products that lend themselves to limited expertise.

V. CLOSURE

- For them.
- For you (assessment).
- For funders/participants; make sure you've documented work.

VI. FOLLOW-UP

- Are you returning? Is someone else?
- Are there upcoming events (exhibitions, performances, screenings, etc.) you can return for?
- Can you get them in touch with other resources?
- **Have you left something behind that can continue without you?**

Facilitators also need to participate in workshops from time to time to renourish themselves. Read texts that are both directly and indirectly related to art and community subjects. Find outlets for your own personal creativity so that too much does not ride on leading workshops.



photo by JESSICA INGRAM

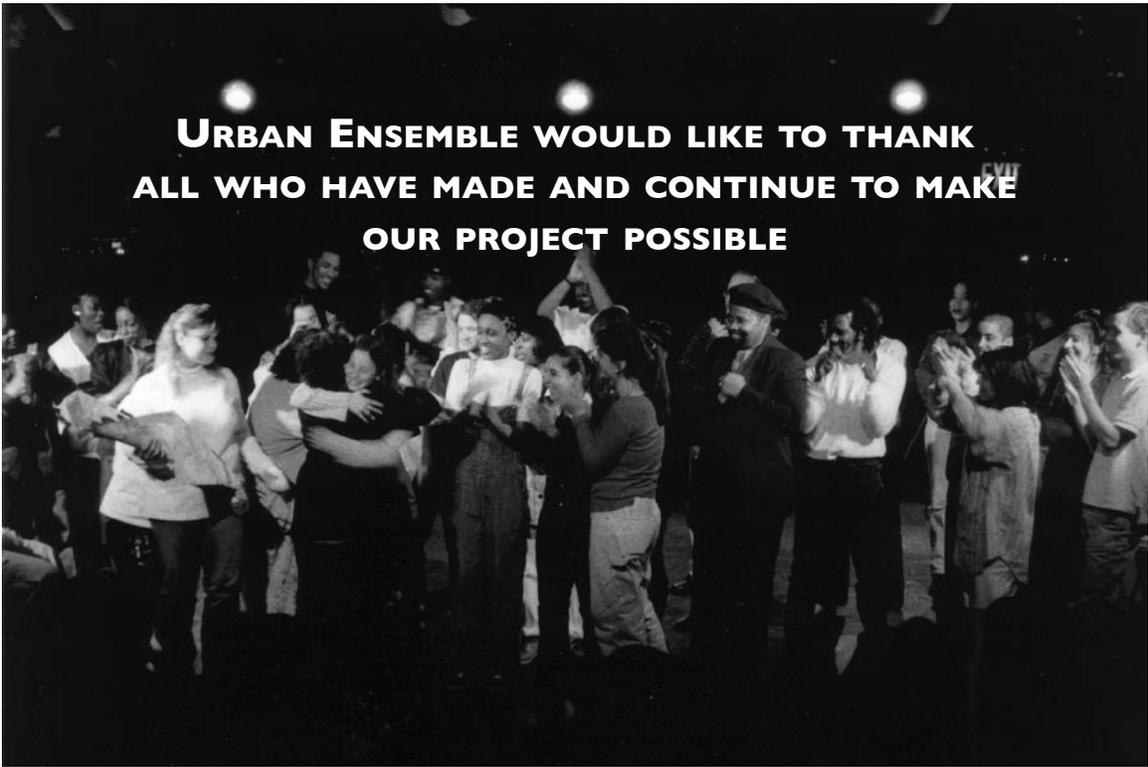


Urban Ensemble meeting, Spring 1996

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IF ONLY I COULD. . .

find my way back home - ROOTS
bring all nationalities together as one
make him want me back
never doubt my impulses
change who I was by just fixing my past
cure hate with a banana milk shake
turn back the clock of life, and tell my grandmother how much I love her
live two lives at once
speak everyone's language
tell the world how I feel right about now
take away the pain of my loved one
never die
retrace my grandfather's footsteps
take away all weapons
bring back Malcolm X and Dr. King
never ask myself "if only I could"

I WOULD. .

let you embark upon my world as I see, feel, touch, smell and hear it
be all over the place in the same time
have everything I want and I need
heal the world
reach all my spiritual goals
kill self doubt
see my children again
live everyday without fear
sing and sing and sing
find a good man
bring the message of safer sex throughout the world
tell him I want to marry him today
have been born yesterday to have the chance to travel amongst the stars
trust that it would all work out, with satisfaction

I would fly.

Collectively-generated poem from an URBAN ENSEMBLE exercise, 1995-96