

**SITTING IN THE QUESTIONS: AN EXCERPT**

by Emmy Bright

This diagram is an excerpt from the larger work "Taxonomy of Questions," which was created as an approach to understanding the relationships among the 257 questions recorded during the Institute of Other Significant Pursuits.



UNIFYING  
SELVES  
THAT  
WHICH  
CONDUCTS

# Unifying Selves

by Caitlin Cali

I am searching for something, the nature of which is unknown to me. There are blind spots. I must have faith while pursuing communion with an ultimate truth. When I make art I am trying to make special that which is important. Searching makes me feel afraid. There are things I have named "Not Me". "Not Me" is a collection of facts about my life, and I have tried to disown it. I am trying to measure "Not Me". Quantify it. Keep it separate. There is resistance because of the fear. But what if fear is a natural reaction to moving closer to the truth? What if, in my search, I must risk glorious failure? I've been told good things happen when you just jump in. Heroes have shown me that by undergoing this work, love can be made visible. What's up with my reluctance to be fully human? Unifying selves. Isn't that the work I seek to do with everyone else?

the hardest part about sitting  
with your fears



is remembering to breathe  
while you're doing it.

# **Sitting With Your Fears**

by Melissa Mendes

NEW URBAN ARTS INSTITUTE FOR OTHER SIGNIFICANT PURSUITS



# **New Urban Arts Botanical Study**

by Priscilla Carrion

# INSTITUTE OF OTHER SIGNIFICANT PURSUITS

*SITTING IN THE QUESTIONS*

NEW URBAN ARTS  
SPRING 2011



this book is dedicated to the artists  
and makers, teachers and learners,  
who value detours, exploration,  
spontaneity, and collaboration. To Other  
Significant Pursuits, to what you are  
doing or what you are thinking or  
what you are thinking about doing.  
To sitting inside the questions.



## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This compilation of work grew out of New Urban Arts' *Institute of Other Significant Pursuits*, a convening of educators and makers who spent three days engaged in conversations on what it means to be a practitioner of art and mentoring. Participants were invited to sit in the questions of what these endeavors entail. This book is a manifestation of both the refined and the raw elements of this inquiry, a tangible testament to the notion of inhabiting the questions, the in-between spaces, the not-knowing. We hope this book will serve as a source of inspiration on the path of investigation, a source of reassurance at times of doubt and frustration and everything in between. In a moment of feeling completely alone, this book can be a way to connect with others who are also in the messy pursuit of making, mentoring, and nurturing creativity.

NOTE: Throughout this publication, we use the following identifiers interchangeably to refer to practitioners who mentor high school students at New Urban Arts: Artist Mentor / Mentor / Teaching Artist / Artist Educator / Community-based Artist / Youth Worker / Artist of Social Practices / Teacher / Facilitator / Organizer

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FORD FOUNDATION

## ABOUT NEW URBAN ARTS

Founded in 1997, New Urban Arts is a nationally recognized arts studio and gallery for high school students and emerging artists in Providence, Rhode Island. Our mission is to build a vital community that empowers young people as artists and leaders to develop a creative practice they can sustain throughout their lives.

Each year, we serve over 400 high school students, 20 emerging artists and over 2,000 visitors through free youth programs, professional development workshops, artist residencies, public performances, and exhibitions.

To learn more, visit [www.newurbanarts.org](http://www.newurbanarts.org)

## ON ARTOGRAPHY

*ARTOGRAPHY: Arts in a Changing America* is a grant and documentation program created to support the work of organizations with exemplary artistic and organizational practices that both acknowledge and engage the shifting national demographic landscape. Now, more than ever, the obligation to broaden the discussion of diverse artistic practices and how they are transforming our understanding of culture is incumbent upon us all. *ARTOGRAPHY* reinforces this dedication to fostering discourse, ongoing learning, and artistic practices that address our ever-evolving society. New Urban Arts is one of nine arts organizations from across the nation selected to participate in *ARTOGRAPHY: Arts in a Changing America*, a grant and documentation program of *Leveraging Investments in Creativity*, funded by the Ford Foundation.

For more information, visit [www.artsinachangingamerica.net](http://www.artsinachangingamerica.net)

# PREFACE

Jason Yoon

As I write this, my twitter, facebook, email, and blog feeds are blowing up with “solutions” for fixing American education. Whether it’s more or fewer charter schools, smaller classrooms, smaller schools, performance pay for teachers, market-driven approaches, more or less testing, I tune out what George Saunders calls “the braintead megaphone” of the mass media in order to stay focused on the real daily work.

At my core, I proudly consider myself an educator. I got into this work for a pretty simple purpose: to help kids learn to “think for themselves and go fuck shit up.” Art seemed a natural way to do that and I became drawn to flexible, supportive communities like New Urban Arts that allowed kids to direct their own learning through close relationships with peers and adults.

Last summer, we launched a new program at New Urban Arts, the *Institute of Other Significant Pursuits*. In organizational development parlance, we called it a “leadership development program” for people who, like me, were former New Urban Arts artist mentors and students. I think of it as a convening of people who, also like me, are deeply committed to helping kids “learn to think for themselves and fuck shit up,” people who are finding ways to make that happen out in the world in their own other incredibly significant pursuits. This book, this *Institute* and our ongoing commitment to people and their other significant pursuits, is our small way of making our mark in the world and, hopefully, cutting through some of this noise.

Jason Yoon  
Executive Director  
New Urban Arts  
June, 2011



## WHO ATTENDED?

We invited nine alumni mentors from five states across the country, along with our four arts mentoring fellows, to the first gathering of the *Institute of Other Significant Pursuits* this summer at New Urban Arts.

**Abel Hernandez** is an artist and designer who enjoys experimenting with different materials. Though trained in industrial design processes, his work is also heavily conceptual. He was recently commissioned to design a piece for an upscale restaurant in Miami, juxtaposing graffiti art with ancient Greek sculpture. As a first-generation Dominican male who grew up in public housing, he is constantly aware of including his community in class discussions at RISD. A recent project involving neighborhood corner stores invites awareness of the lack of produce available to underprivileged minorities. He sees his health as a long-term investment and participates regularly in triathlons and marathons. To connect with his culture, he also dances salsa, which celebrates Afro-Latin style. He first participated in New Urban Arts as a high school student and has volunteered as an artist mentor since 2008. He is currently a senior in Industrial Design at the Rhode Island School of Design.

*"Through New Urban Arts, I was connected to valuable mentors who have shaped my personal and artistic life. My own dialogue is informed by this community of artists who are intellectuals diverse in their approaches, actively questioning norms, and practicing artmaking as cultural study."*

**Bremen Donovan** is a filmmaker and photographer who studied film at Tisch School of the Arts and graduated from Brown University. She was awarded the 2008 Samuel T. Arnold Fellowship to pursue a year of independent research in Sierra Leone, West Africa, and is now based in both Sierra Leone and New York City. Her film *Ursula*, about young Sierra Leonean women building sexual relationships in pursuit of personal power and security, is currently in production. The project aims to deepen discussion about the nature of human bonds predicated on monetary exchange and explores the formation of informal communities, particularly among young people, in societies characterized by conflict and displacement. Visit [www.bremendonovan.com](http://www.bremendonovan.com) to view the trailer. Bremen is interested in diverse means of storytelling, and her approach

values field-based research and collaborative processes. Recently she co-wrote and directed *Talking Borders*, a fictional adaptation of long-term field research by UK-based Conciliation Resources on tension in the Mano River border region of West Africa. She also produced a photographic portrait of life in refugee camps along the Thai-Burma border called *Living on the Border*, supported by the Brown University Watson Institute for International Studies and the Bangkok-based Overseas Processing Entity for Thailand and Southeast Asia. Her work as an artist educator has taken her from Light House Studio, New Urban Arts, and I.S. 265 in the United States to We Own TV in Sierra Leone and Cine Institute in Haiti. Bremen volunteered as an artist mentor at New Urban Arts from 2006 to 2008, where she launched its first filmmaking program.

*"New Urban Arts is a safe space, a place that challenges traditional boundaries, and a place where symbiotic learning between mentors and students means that everybody is constantly giving and receiving greatly. I had never been part of an organization whose leadership was composed so fully of the people it served."*

**Caitlin Cali** is an illustrator and screenprinter who works to connect with people through genuine observant listening and vulnerable storytelling. Her works are mostly personal stories illustrated and told in symbols and patterns of many colors. Her artistic work is linked to her work with others; they overlap with a hope that they strike some kind of awareness or awakening in someone else. She looks for environments where she can work intimately and intuitively. She is currently co-developing a day program to support individuals with developmental disabilities focusing on health and wellness and job skills training with an emphasis on creative arts and entrepreneurship. She writes and draws nearly every day. She has taken on multiple roles at New Urban Arts since 2008, including artist mentor, summer studio coordinator, and the youth leadership board liaison and mentor.

*"As an artist mentor I learned that it is necessary to step outside of the boundaries of what I believe to be familiar. When I leave what's familiar and embrace the unknown, I am free. Working at New Urban Arts is connected to everything I do. It gives me a very-clear template to refer to when I find myself far, far away from its warm embrace. I try to bring a little bit of that warmth and mystery into otherwise dull/hardened situations and institutional cultures that are stale and stagnant."*

**Daniel Schleifer** is a founding member, Sousaphone player, and composer in the What Cheer? Brigade, an 18-member brass band that has toured internationally, with a recent tour to Europe this summer. In 2009, he taught a street band program at AS220 Youth. From 2004 to 2009, Daniel worked as a policy researcher, organizer, grant writer and lobbyist for Open Doors RI (formerly the RI Family Life Center). In 2006, he served as field director of the Rhode Island Right to Vote Campaign (a project of Open Doors RI), a successful effort to amend the Rhode Island Constitution to extend voting rights to individuals on probation and parole. Daniel joined the New Urban Arts community in the fall of 2007 to pilot the Studio Study Buddy program, which combines academic tutoring with the structure and principles of New Urban Arts' Artist Mentorship. His experience at New Urban Arts awakened a passion for innovative educational models. He volunteered as a tutor and mentor from 2007-10. He is now on staff as New Urban Arts' development associate.

*"New Urban Arts is the standard of excellence to which I compare all of the collective endeavors in which I'm engaged. New Urban Arts is a supportive place that students and artists can go to be a little more human. We're providing a space where youth learn that they can make their own meaning in the world instead of relying solely on mass culture for their sense of identity."*

**Jane Androski** is a graphic designer, educator and facilitator for whose creative practice listening, exploration and collaboration are central. She is interested in the role that designers play in social practice/community building, and in understanding how creativity and dialogue can be incorporated into pedagogy in ways that allow students to be more fully engaged in their education.

This June, Jane will receive her MFA in Graphic Design from the Rhode Island School of Design. During her time at RISD, she designed and taught the graduate level course, Design Agency (with thesis collaborator Emily Sara Wilson) – an interdisciplinary seminar which challenged her fellow graduate students to bring the same level of accountability to their social practice as they do to their aesthetic one. She also helped organize actions around the closing of the Office of Public Engagement – the only formally-recognized space within RISD that supported graduate students in community-based practice.

Before her studies at RISD, Jane was the Assistant Director to the Difficult Dialogues Initiative at Clark University, where she helped develop programming that encouraged dialogic practice within institutions and classrooms. She also studied art making and community practice at The River Gallery School in Brattleboro, Vermont, a community-based art school for children and adults.

Jane has been involved at New Urban Arts in a variety of capacities since 2008, as an artist mentor, an Americorps VISTA Summer Associate, a summer Art Inquiry mentor, a community storyteller, and as a chair of the space and design committees that initiated community conversations around New Urban Arts' recent decision to secure a larger and more permanent home.

*"Walking into the studio at New Urban Arts each day, not knowing what to expect, is a true exercise in presence. I've learned not to anticipate what might happen, but instead to simply listen for what arises. That place of unknowing is where true creativity emerges – where something can arise that has never been created before. I see this played out at New Urban Arts almost every day."*

**Jenn Rice** likes making art that involves messes, smudging, sewing, cooking and eating, listening and reflecting. She first participated in New Urban Arts as a high school student, when she started the fashion program and taught bookmaking with her peers to adults who had recently immigrated to the United States. This is when she first learned how to use art as a tool for building relationships and exploring creative problem solving, rather than simply a means of expression. After graduating in 2003, she joined City Year for a year of full-time service teaching art to elementary school students. The following year, she was an Americorps Vista member at New Urban Arts, working on program development, particularly building the creative practice model, a way of understanding the practice of being creative. Jenn has engaged others through art and fashion at a variety of locations, including the Rhode Island School of Design Continuing Education classes for youth, Providence Afterschool Alliance, Socio-Economic Development Center For Southeast Asians, Cambodian Temple, kindergarten at the YMCA, and the Genesis Center, a human services organization that provides adult education for immigrants. She is a part-time minister at Victory Outreach Center. She has volunteered in many capacities at New Urban Arts, including as an artist mentor, from 2005-11. She still helps plan the annual fashion show each year.

*"My experience at New Urban Arts augmented my humanity. My heart made a home here. Because people here are investing in me, I want to invest in other people. It's like a trickling down effect. We have to nurture as many artists as we can. It takes creativity to contribute to the world."*

**Lane Taplin** directs an art program for adults with developmental disabilities in Portland, OR. Her creative practice encompasses weaving, installation work, creative facilitation, baking bread, fermentation experiments and growing vegetables. She is currently dreaming up ways of using art to build community and facilitate unexpected connections between people. She also ponders gardening, art and permaculture and how these things can come together. She volunteered as an artist mentor at New Urban Arts from 2008 to 2009 while attending the Rhode Island School of Design, where she studied textiles.

*"Being a mentor at New Urban Arts is one of the most enlivening experiences I've ever had. It gave me the space to work with people in a way that did not feel restricting. Here my art becomes what I've always wanted it to be: experimental, fun, open, playful, shared, and most importantly, collaborative. There is no "mine" or "yours" — everything is ours. My work at New Urban Arts has very strongly informed the work I am doing now as my job because it was based in having meaningful connections with other people rather than just instructing."*

**Melissa Mendes** is a comic artist and illustrator who recently received an MFA from the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont. She is a 2010 recipient of a grant from the Xeric Foundation for comic book self-publishers. She is currently working with Jose-Luis Olivare on *Kids*, an anthology about children or childhood, for MoCCA Fest 2011. Melissa volunteered as an artist mentor at New Urban Arts from 2006 to 2008. Visit her website at <http://www.mmmendes.com>.

*"I first came to the studio because I wanted to share what I knew about making comics; I left with a new understanding of what it means to be a creative person. It gave me a new direction to move towards in life."*

**Zachary Clark** became involved in community-based arts organizations throughout Providence after graduating from Brown University. During – and inspired by – his time at New Urban Arts, he decided to take this practice somewhere far, far away,

ultimately accepting a community arts internship offer in Charlotte, North Carolina. Too many hush puppies later, he couldn't turn back. Zachary continued to seek out and participate in arts programming within the context of a largely corporate city. He now works as an outreach artist through Freedom Schools and is the Program Manager at the Cabarrus Arts Council. He also teaches monthly painting classes on a farm in the rural Piedmont of North Carolina. He is very interested in large-scale public projects. He is attending the Arts in Education Program at Harvard Graduate School of Education in the fall. He volunteered as an artist mentor at New Urban Arts from 2008 to 2009.

*"I see the work at New Urban Arts as a study in community engagement, artmaking and relationship-building. It sustains challenging and meaningful dialogue alongside sock puppet workshops and flyswatter paintings, never once sacrificing one for the other. I want to bring this idea to new places - places that are specifically at the intersection of art and community."*

# QUESTIONS:

ARE WE OUR CREATIVE PRACTICE?  
OR IS THAT WHAT WE DO?

HOW DO WE ASK QUESTIONS  
IN A PLACE WHICH  
DOESN'T ASK QUESTIONS?

HOW DO WE MAKE LESS AWESOME  
PLACES MORE AWESOME?

# AFFIRMATIONS:

YOU ARE YOUR CREATIVE PRACTICE.  
YOUR CREATIVE PRACTICE IS  
WHAT YOU DO.

ASK QUESTIONS IN A PLACE  
THAT DOESN'T ASK QUESTIONS.

MAKE LESS AWESOME PLACES  
MORE AWESOME.

# FORTUNES / PROMPTS / AFFIRMATIONS

Jane Androski

[Manifesto]

We will figure out how to write about the *Institute* and will encourage others to share their writing. There is meaning in our words. We will embrace the fragility of gestation and emergence. In the end, we know that art is a vehicle, not an outcome. We will let go of the outcome. It'll be like placing a memory in the world for others to find.

By documenting the work of the conference, we believe we can facilitate a deeper, more reflective experience. We will learn by doing: learn what we know and how we know; what others know and how others know. Learn. Know.

It's quite possible that our minds will be blown apart by new thoughts! But no big deal, we'll identify the invisible threads, turn those scattered ideas into a concrete step-by-step thing. It will then be possible to tell other people in our lives how important this place is for us.

Places like New Urban Arts are made. And yes, it's true, some places are much more awesome than other places. We are committed to protecting the existing awesomeness of this place. But also to making less awesome places more awesome. We will find a particularly New Urban Arts way to go about this. We know how to make a space welcoming. New Urban Arts has effectively equipped us to handle this.

We will introduce the ideas that are important to us to the groups we work with in a way that is sincere and organic. We will apply our mentoring experience at New Urban Arts to the real world; bring the magic of New Urban Arts into others' lives and help them to be creative.

But how can we not? After all we are our creative practice. Or our creative practice is, at least, what we do. We can't help but bring it with us into the outside world. It's what allows us to find meaning in our lives – a way to stretch and fit ourselves between our self-definitions and the structures of the world.

Unpack yourself. Be comfortable with that interaction.  
Find a way to continue this conversation.

In our work out in the world, we will find the projects and clients we want to have, all the while discovering the qualities of our individual artmaking and practice. We will figure out what success is and how money fits in:  
Know what is attainable.  
Figure out what is realistic.  
But do not close the door.

We will be as outlandish as we can be. We will decide to become outlandish. It takes courage. It's possible that in the process, we may feel overwhelmed with the desire to bust our hearts open and let everything, good and bad, live inside. But sometimes, external conditions demand a response. We will know whether we are making the right choices and learn how to deal with negativity.

And we won't forget what we were like before we became outlandish.

There's what we do, and then there's the process behind it. As creators, we will move forward while preserving that essence. We will shape our practices so as not to be hemmed in by convention. We will ask questions in places that don't ask questions in order to cultivate conversations outside of here. We will encourage others to be honest. We will measure when to be quiet. And we will understand the context for our impact – what it is and who it is for.

Hand down your practices.  
Allow people to bring their fullness to New Urban Arts.  
Sense your individual opportunity and potential for growth.  
Realize your fullest potential.  
Make an impact.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SLEUTHING

"QUESTIONS ARE A BACK DOOR ENTRYWAY  
THAT IS LESS AGGRESSIVE" - CAITLIN CALI

### SLEUTH

n. A DETECTIVE

v. SLEUTHED, SLEUTH'ING, SLEUTHS

TO TRACK OR FOLLOW. TO ACT AS A DETECTIVE.

SLEUTHING STRATEGIES: LISTENING FOR MOMENTS AND ENTERING IN

GO OUT FOR A BREATH OF FRESH AIR.

FIND A STEADY SPOT TO STAND ON.

(PICTURE A PILOT LIGHT IN YOUR HEART. EVERYONE HAS ONE, IT'S ALWAYS ON, AND IF YOU CAN FIND IT, IT REALLY LIGHTS STUFF UP).

WHEN FIRST SEEN, YOU'LL OFTEN GET A NERVOUS

"I'M NOT SURE ABOUT YOU / F-YOU" LOOK.

IF YOU SIT THERE QUIETLY, OBSERVING WITHOUT EXPECTATION  
(EMANATING AS MUCH GOODNESS AS YOU CAN FIND...)

THEN THEY BECOME INTERESTED IN YOU.

IF YOU FOLLOW THEIR LEAD AND CREEP ALONG,

WITH THEM SETTING THE PACE,

THEY WILL SIT THERE WITH YOU.

YOU NEED TO JOIN THEIR TEAM BEFORE THEY JOIN YOURS

BUT IF YOU MAKE ABRUPT MOTIONS, THEY WILL RUN AWAY.

AND YOU'LL HAVE TO START FROM SCRATCH AGAIN.

BUT IT WILL TAKE TWICE AS LONG.

PACE THE FOLLOW THROUGH WITH RESPECT OF THEIR SPACE AND BOUNDARIES.

WEAR THE CONVERSATION LIKE A LOOSE COAT.

REMAIN UNAASSUMING.

EXCUSE YOURSELF FROM THE INSTINCT TO OFFER UP YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE OR ADVICE.

KEEP LISTENING. PROVE YOU'RE INVESTED IN THEM.

SHARE THINGS YOU'VE NOTICED THAT YOU RESPECT ABOUT THEM, AS A WAY TO OPEN THINGS UP.

LATER ON, WHEN IT FEELS RIGHT, SOMETIMES A SMALL EFFORT OR OFFERING IS CALLED FOR.

RATHER THAN SHUTTING THEM DOWN BECAUSE OF YOUR OWN DISCOMFORT,

INSTEAD OF CHANGING YOUR TONE AND FACE TO A DISAPPROVING ONE, SAY "THAT MAKES ME

UNCOMFORTABLE" OR "I'M NOT SURE WHAT YOU MEAN."

KEEP IT SILLY AND PLAYFUL WITH BENEVOLENT FIRMNESS.

DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY.

GET OUT OF THE WAY.

HELP PEOPLE TO UNCOVER THEIR OWN THINKING ABOUT THINGS

# PLACEMAKING AND ENTERING A COMMUNITY

A Workshop led by Rick Benjamin

“Placemaking for me is to create spaciousness in confined, contained, restrictive places. We can find freedom and tenderness in containment that could otherwise be debilitating.” – Rick Benjamin

Read *The Quiet World* by Jeffrey McDaniel.  
Then, in 59 words, write a poem as loving and spacious as you can make it.



Portrait of Rick Benjamin by Kedrin Frias

You have crows wings  
Black and shiny  
I love to see you fly

Powerful little dark crow  
Hopping suspiciously towards  
What will feed you

I stepped on a black feather  
And cried myself to sleep  
Thinking about curses  
And blessings

It's okay with me that  
You cast shadows in my light

In the beginning  
You made me strong,  
Loved

-Caitlin Cali

I'm grateful that you brought it in—  
the mail—  
That day when I couldn't get up.

My letters placed so carefully on top of your own  
When I walked by.  
Above,  
Given precedence.

I was taken care of.

I'm up now  
And I'll organize your letters for you.  
On top,  
So you can see them as you walk by.

-Zachary Clark

HOLDING

*a time*

WITH

SOMEBODY



# PROGRESSIVE EDUCATION PEDAGOGY

A Workshop led by Peter Hocking

Participants explore intersections between the alternative education models of Paulo Freire, Jane Adams, Myles Horton, bell hooks and Maxine Greene, among others.

PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED by Paulo Freire  
DOROTHY DAY: A RADICAL DEVOTION by Robert Coles  
TEACHING AS STORYTELLING by Kieran Egan  
JOHN DEWEY & THE LESSONS OF ART by Phillip Jackson  
UNEARTHING SEEDS OF FIRE: THE IDEA OF HIGHLANDER  
by Myles Horton, Herbert R. Kohl, Judith Kohl  
THE CALL OF STORIES: TEACHING ~~XXX~~ AND THE MORAL IMAGINATION  
by Robert Coles  
THE BODIES THAT WERE NOT OURS by Coco Fusco  
TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS by bell hooks  
TEACHING COMMUNITY by bell hooks  
TEACHING CRITICAL THINKING by bell hooks  
SPEAKING FOR VICE by Jonathan Weinberg  
SAINT FOCAULT by David Halperin  
THE SHAPE OF CONTENT by Ben Shahn  
THE REENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD by Morris Berman  
ART AND INTIMACY: HOW THE ARTS BEGAN by Ellen Dissanayake  
WE MAKE THE ROAD BY WALKING: CONVERSATIONS ON EDUCATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE  
by Paulo Freire, Myles Horton  
YOUTH LEARNING ON THEIR OWN TERMS: CREATIVE PRACTICES AND  
CLASSROOM TEACHING by Leif Gustavson  
RELEASING THE IMAGINATION: ESSAYS ON EDUCATION, THE ARTS,  
AND SOCIAL CHANGE by Maxine Greene



THEORY IS BEST  
USED BACKWARDS.  
YOU BEGIN WITH  
INTUITION IN PRACTICE  
THEN FLESH IT OUT  
WITH THEORY FOR  
ILLUMINATION... "OH,  
THAT'S WHAT I WAS  
UP TO..." (ZC)

THEORY NOT TREATED  
AS A FLOOR PLAN SO  
MUCH AS (BD)

A FRAMEWORK. (DS)

These are excerpts from conversations held in Peter's workshop. They illuminate the experience of *The Institute* and the way participants were sitting in their questions together, the way they were riffing off each other

I WANT THINGS TO BE SIGNIFICANT FOR EVERYONE, FOR THEM TO BE INVOLVED AND FOR IT TO BE PERSONAL. (LT)

THERE IS AN ANXIETY THAT EXISTS BETWEEN INVITATION AND IMPOSITION. (ZC)

ONE OF THE DANGERS IS YOU ERASE YOURSELF FROM THE LEARNING PROCESS BECAUSE YOU ARE SO INTENT ON IT BEING LEARNER CENTERED... YOUR STUDENTS WANT YOU TO BE PRESENT, EVEN WHEN YOU AREN'T IN COMPLETE AUTHORITY... THEY SAY DON'T TURN YOURSELF OFF TO TURN ME ON. (PH)

# **FREEING IDEAS**

Peter Hocking

In the years before his passing, Myles Horton, the founder of the Highlander Research and Education Center, told a story about the day in 1961 when the governors of several Southern states successfully conspired, in an effort to curb the Civil Rights Movement, to close Highlander. Several reporters witnessed Horton laughing as state troopers padlocked the school's door. Asked why he was laughing as his school was being closed, Horton replied, "My friend here thinks he's closing the school. But Highlander is an idea. You can't padlock an idea."

Through a much different lens, but no less profoundly, I was reminded of this story when, in late August 2010, a small group of alumni mentors from New Urban Arts gathered to have a dialogue about how our association with the program impacts our creative and pedagogical practices. The gathering, *The Institute of Other Significant Pursuits*, was a mix of skills workshops, reflective exercises, and opportunities to build relationships across several generations of Art Mentoring staff. Repeatedly it was made clear how the idea of New Urban Arts infuses our collective vision for what arts education – indeed all education – can be. Perhaps even more intriguingly, there was an explicit agreement amongst many of those gathered that teaching in the program had been among their most profound learning experiences.

Like Highlander, New Urban Arts is not a content-based educational program. Although many people think of it as an "arts education" program, it is not the most efficient place to learn technique or skills. While young people can acquire skills through the relationships they develop with mentors, the real mission of the program is to develop a lifetime of creative practice – in the full diversity of forms implied by that phrase. While Highlander "works with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny" through popular education methods that emphasize peer learning and problem-solving, New Urban Arts encourages youth and mentors to explore a variety of media and methods for expressing personal meaning, inquiring into personal and community questions, and discovering one's potential. Many art programs establish limits based on the flexibility of media. New Urban Arts begins with the intellectual and expressive

passions of youth and finds the media to match the young person's line of inquiry. It may seem like a subtle distinction, but just try to build a house with a sewing machine or hem pants with a power drill. At New Urban Arts, youth don't have to paint poetry, although a few have certainly tried!

...

The progress and growth of a culture relies on those places and people who act on new hypotheses and in service to testing new ideas. New Urban Arts doesn't begin with the supposition that it's preparing anyone to learn or live within the limitations of the status quo. It understands that people – learners and mentors alike – can imagine a world that works better than the one they -- and we – have inherited.

While the experience of being in a learning community committed to this kind of creative experimentation can be exhilarating, for young people who are, perhaps for the first time, engaging their leadership, it's easy to take for granted that their voices will be heard and valued. New Urban Arts has come to understand, over the course of many years and through the various experiences of participants, that the kind of educational context it cultivates is unusual and highly valued. While this is useful and affirming feedback it raises vexing pedagogical and organizational questions. If there are not an abundance of other learning communities committed to its values, how does it prepare its learners and mentors to navigate work and educational spaces that are not committed to the same values? How is it preparing people who may find themselves working and living in communities opposed to the learner-centered pedagogy to which it's committed? How is it helping young people create new sites of creative experimentation and transformation?

...

I started by comparing New Urban Arts with Highlander because as part of the *Institute* I was asked to map my genealogy as a progressive educator. When New Urban Arts was beginning, I was an advisor to the founding executive director. He had been a student at the Howard Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University, which I directed. The Center's approach was deeply influenced by Highlander, as well as by the

teachings of John Dewey and, more contemporaneously, bell hooks, Maxine Greene, and Paulo Freire. In many ways, in the years since my departure from the Swearer Center, New Urban Arts resembles more the Center's pedagogy during my tenure than the Center does today.

This observation about my own lineage helps me to understand the urgency and necessity of the Institute in three ways. First, the pedagogical lineages that we inherit, build upon, and embrace are not possessions; they are relational tools that we can apply in our work, teaching and learning. Second, it's important to make known the philosophical genealogy of organizations – especially of those that support human freedom and self-determination -- and to help participants in these organizations become aware of the intention that goes into establishing a learner-centered culture. Third, it recognizes the ways that those who participate in these kinds of learning environments are often the best suited to bring their values into the world. It's this final point that I want to underscore.

The easy thing for New Urban Arts to do would be to give in to philanthropic and political pressure to replicate itself, expand its programming, or otherwise risk the integrity of its programming in service to an external social agenda. However, many small education programs are effective precisely because of their scale and the ability for all the people in the community to recognize and truly see each other. Importantly, New Urban Arts has an established organizational policy intended to forestall this risk.

Instead of potentially diluting its work, New Urban Arts has initiated this *Institute* as a means for supporting the development of the creative and pedagogical practices of former and current mentors. Understanding that the best way to share the knowledge that emerges from its practice is to support its distribution through the professional and artist practices of its mentors and students, the *Institute* provides a space for self-reflection, skills development, and a deep consideration of means through which artistic and educational communities can be developed and nurtured. By developing perspective, skills and a network of mutual support, New Urban Arts is advancing its reach into the world. By helping mentors understand the structures that scaffold the program, their approach will become more widely available through mentors who explicitly incorporate the ideas into their professional practice.

In addition to preserving New Urban Arts' scale and success, this approach also allows for its "idea" to have a life of its own and to develop in ways that are distinct and specific to the context in which they're growing. Practices of freedom require that they be true to their context, and not another cultural attempt to franchise the particularity of experience. In this way, just like the padlocked Highlander campus of the early 1960s, it's quite likely that the idea of New Urban Arts will outlive its current space and incarnation.



What are your three questions after the workshop?

How can I ~~overcome my fears~~ be fearless?



# NOTES ON NOTES

Andrew Oesch

Within this publication are notes from the *Institute of Other Significant Pursuits*. Each participant received a workbook at the start of the weekend. A xeroxed booklet was divided into three sections, itemizing the agenda for each day of the gathering, with in-depth descriptions of the workshops, bios of presenters, and blank space to capture notes and doodles. On the final day together, we asked everyone to paperclip a selection of pages from their notes, which revealed a wide variety of processes and styles. Some pages encompassed doodles with single phrases, others were long lists stretching to the margins of the page. Some laid out their notes with a sense of pace, weight and emphasis. Others posed questions or captured quotes from visitors or other participants. The compilation of notes spanned the depths of inquiry to the calming doodle.

We photocopied these pages and gathered as an entire group around a set of pushed-together tables to annotate each other's notes. Circling, highlighting, staring, hearting, marking up the words that resonated. But this was not just a marking for ourselves. After finding our gem on a single page, we became like another pass through the copier, repeating our highlighting again and again on over a dozen copies of each page. Once we had finished a stack of pages, we passed it along to our neighbor, circulating the pages around the table. Our marks accumulated on each page, and in a certain way, we became a collection of very discerning copiers ourselves, repeating our highlighter marks repetitively to each selected page. At the conclusion of the three intensive days, there were some sighs of exasperation and concerns of whether we should cut the exercise short, so as to wrap up the day, but we pressed on because it was engrossing. Getting to read each other's notes was a very personal investigation into the weekend. It was the beginning of reflecting on how this experience was affecting each of us and each circled phrase affirmed where our experiences were aligned or uncovered another new perspective on the proceedings.

Activity in group - talk in pairs about what you have in common

Facilitator is in a **mutual** role, has no content, is **Neutral**, unlike a teacher, leader, who have **POWER**

↳ don't express what you're thinking

\* I want to be a facilitator for staff + clients \*



What is it about me that is sometimes hard for other people?

SOMETHING ABOUT ME + THE GROUP I'M GOING TO WORK ON  
- I have a hard time speaking in front of a group, (today)  
expressing myself accurately - I want to communicate better.

## QUESTIONS

- How can one facilitate w/out imposing, condescending, esp. when one can't relate to the group
- How can one step from role of power into facilitation role?
- How do you effectively deal w/ unabashed negativity?
- How do you teach facilitation?
- Neutrality - how valuable is ideal of neutrality?

In common w/ facilitators / follow-up questions...

- REMAINING SURPRISE

- SILENCE + REFLECTION

Simple things becoming extraordinary

"You're a vet, you pick up the things that fall through the cracks" - Zach

objects about energy, holding history - giving to the next generation

hey, this workshop is giving me the courage to see myself as a facilitator



LITH BEHAR  
the venerable observer

ROBERT COLE

"PROGRAM  
OBSERVATION  
SPECIALIST"

[emmy]

there may be many, many  
stories in your data; its  
about choosing which to  
tell first. [EMMYBRIGHT.COM]

# GIVING SMALL MOMENTS POWER

stumbling over your  
first moments of  
uncertainty in voicing  
your subjective  
statements...  
in a space where  
further generation  
of ideas/story can  
occur.

can't  
start  
this by  
myself  
but  
can't  
make  
it mean-  
ingful  
by  
myself.

yes  
SUPER

HOW  
CAN  
YOU

BUILD  
CON-  
VER-  
SATIONS

around  
what/  
how  
you  
show?

MENTATION THAT IS WOVEN IN, RATHER THAN

I'M INVESTED IN THIS NOTION THAT WE ARE MAKERS AND THAT THIS IS A GOOD PLACE TO START. AND ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS SINGULAR ACKNOWLEDGEMENT - THAT WE ARE, WITHOUT EXCEPTION, ALL MAKERS - IS A VAGUE BUT PERSISTENT IDEA ABOUT COMMUNITY, ABOUT TRANSFORMATION, ABOUT SIGNIFICANCE. THIS IS THE FIRST AND FUNDAMENTAL BELIEF. I START WITH THIS.

WE SHOULD ADVENTURE, IN SOME WAYS AND OTHERWISE ALONE. MY GRANDMOTHER LIVED ON AN ACRE OF UNTAMED LAND, DENSE AND TWISTING AND THRILLING, WHERE I WOULD EXPLORE AS A CHILD. I THINK THAT I WAS AN ARTIST THEN. IN CRAFTING MY OWN IDEA ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AN ARTIST, I CANNOT EVER SEEM TO DIVORCE THE NOTION OF MAKING FROM MY ROMANTIC AND LONG-HELD IDEAS ABOUT EXPLORING. THEY ARE BOUND, MERGED, AND I NO LONGER SEEK TO SEPARATE THEM.

MY ROLE AS A MAKER EXISTS IN RELATION TO THE MAKINGS OF OTHERS. THERE ARE PROJECTS CRAFTED BY MY PEERS THAT I CLAIM AS

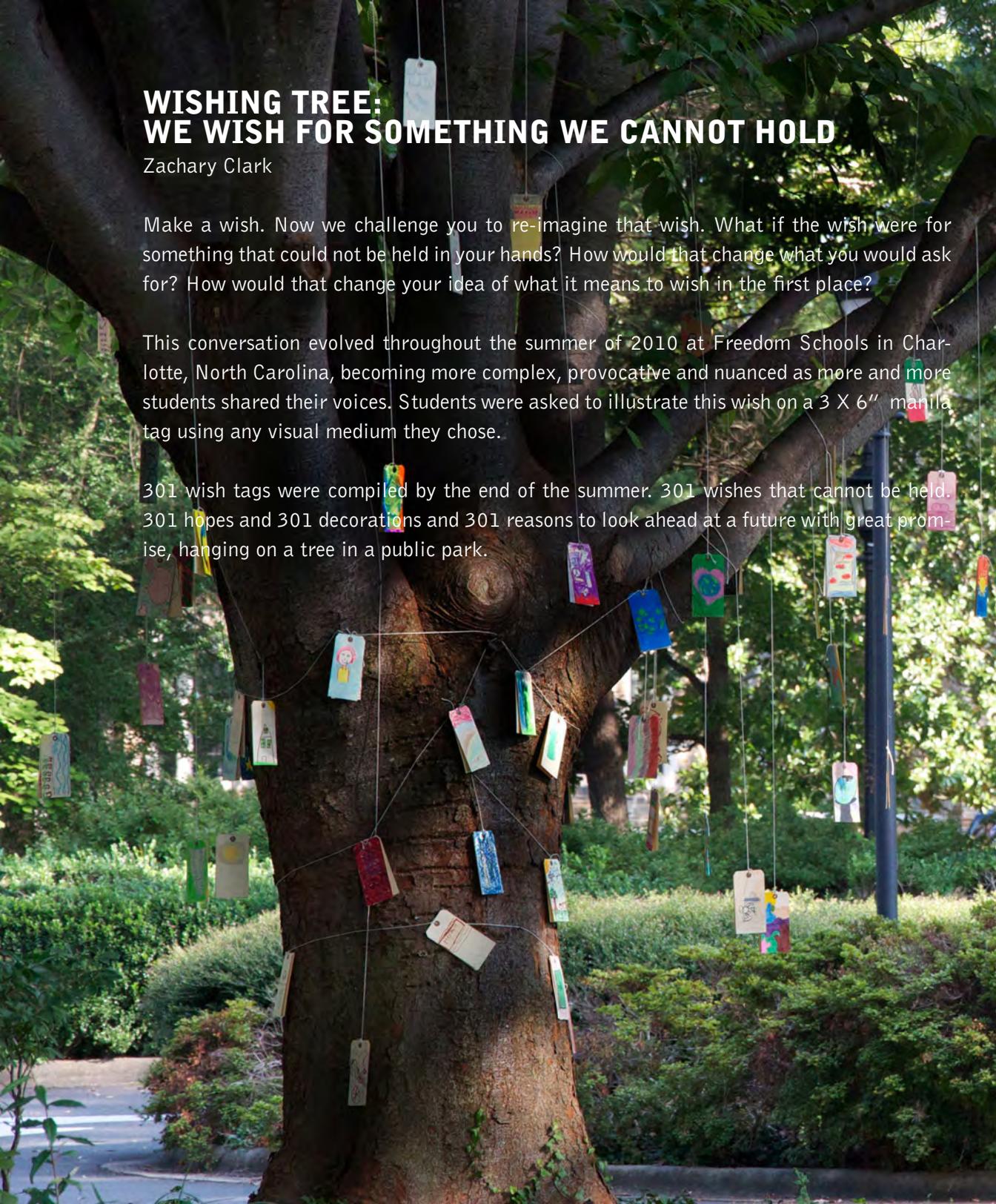
PARTLY MINE, AND WORKS EMERGED FROM MY OWN HANDS OF WHICH OTHERS CLAIM OWNERSHIP. THIS IS RIGHT. I COLLABORATE. AND IN THAT SHARED EXPERIENCE OF CREATING, I FIND A FAMILIAR ADVENTURE - AS IF WE'RE CLIMBING AND UNEARTHING, SUNBURNED. MY PRACTICE FEELS DISTINCTLY PHYSICAL IN THIS WAY, EVEN WHEN IT'S NOT. SOMETIMES, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT'S NOT.

I THINK THAT BEAUTY EMERGES FROM THIS PURSUIT, BUT THAT BEAUTY IS RELATIVE. I THINK THAT CHANGE IS OFTEN BORN, BUT THAT CHANGE IS NOT ALWAYS OBVIOUS. I DON'T PROPOSE A SOLUTION TO INDIVIDUALS OUTSIDE MYSELF THROUGH MY OWN PRACTICE, BUT I COMMIT MYSELF TO HELPING THEM DEVELOP THEIR OWN. I EXIST ALONGSIDE MY COLLABORATORS, NOT BEFORE OR BEHIND. THIS MAY BE THE MOST IMPORTANT FACET OF MY PRACTICE, AND FOR THIS REASON I'M COMMITTED TO IT'S SURVIVAL

- ZACHARY CLARK

INSTITUTE OF OTHER SIGNIFICANT  
PURSUITS

AUGUST 2010



# WISHING TREE: WE WISH FOR SOMETHING WE CANNOT HOLD

Zachary Clark

Make a wish. Now we challenge you to re-imagine that wish. What if the wish were for something that could not be held in your hands? How would that change what you would ask for? How would that change your idea of what it means to wish in the first place?

This conversation evolved throughout the summer of 2010 at Freedom Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina, becoming more complex, provocative and nuanced as more and more students shared their voices. Students were asked to illustrate this wish on a 3 X 6" manila tag using any visual medium they chose.

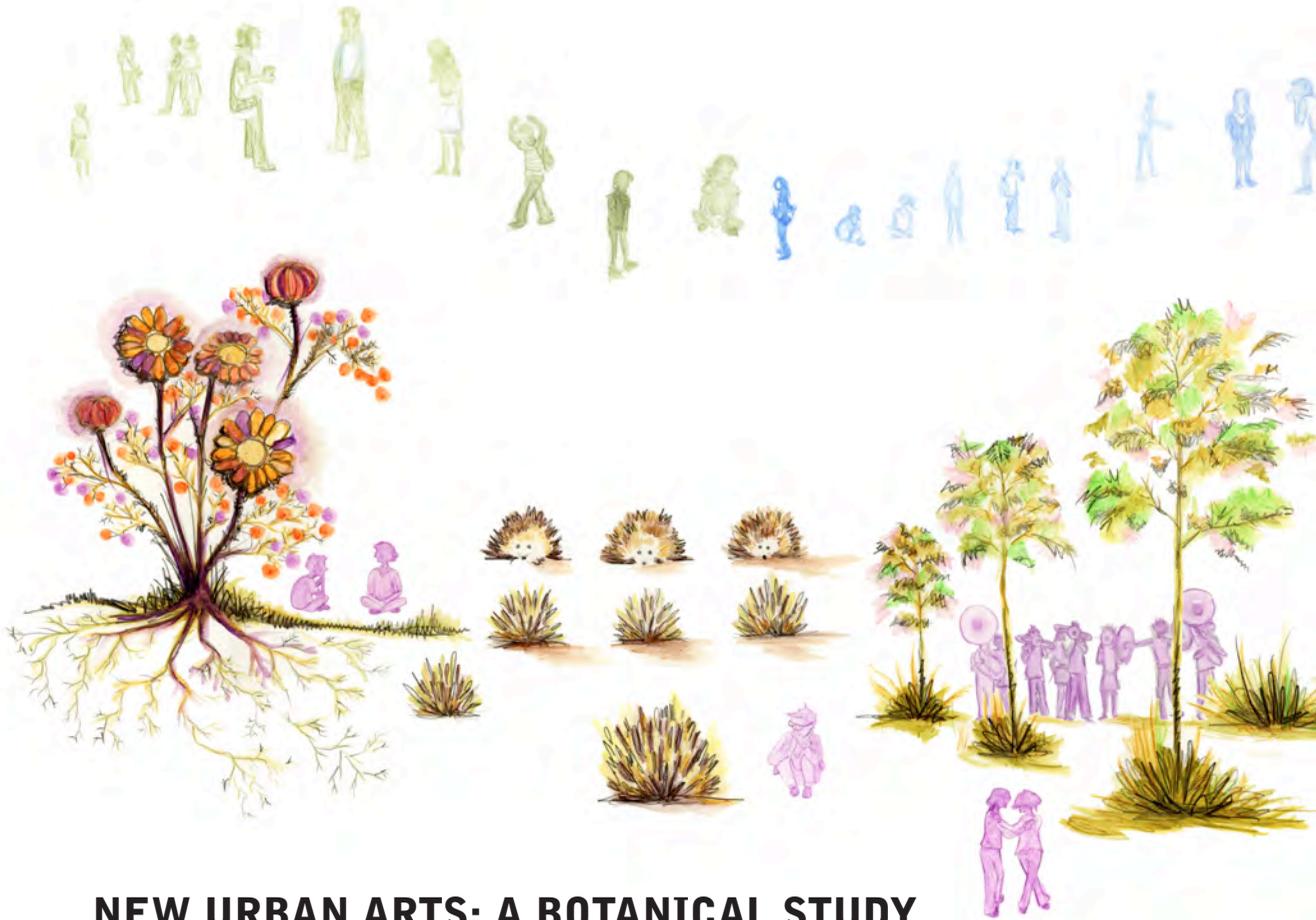
301 wish tags were compiled by the end of the summer. 301 wishes that cannot be held. 301 hopes and 301 decorations and 301 reasons to look ahead at a future with great promise, hanging on a tree in a public park.

HOW DO YOU PLAN YOUR WORK?  
WHAT ARE YOUR STRATEGIES FOR  
CONNECTING WITH GROUPS?  
HOW DO YOU TACKLE LARGER  
PROJECTS? WHAT DO YOU LOVE  
ABOUT YOUR MEDIUM(S)? WHERE  
DO YOU WANT IT TO TAKE YOU?  
HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU SEE THE  
WORLD? WHERE ARE YOU CURI-  
OUS? WHERE ARE YOU VULNER-  
ABLE? WHAT IDEAS ARE YOU  
SEEKING FEEDBACK ON? HOW  
DID YOU COME TO IDENTITY AS  
AN ARTIST AND/OR EDUCATOR?



## MAPPING ORIGINS & UNCERTAIN HORIZONS

What are the qualities of your practices/pursuits/questions? Make a list. Share in small groups. Make constellations of the shared qualities that emerged for the map.



## NEW URBAN ARTS: A BOTANICAL STUDY

Illustration by Pricilla Carrion; Text by Sarah Meyer

Through listening for common themes in the conversations between alumni artist mentors practicing community arts in different locations and settings across the country, this study asks: How does New Urban Arts manifest as a shared approach among artists with diverse backgrounds, education, career aspirations and art media?

Fig. 1. *Authenticity*: Makes meaning; personal. Honest; sincere. Rooted. Exposed. Sustaining. Endangered by jargon and misnomers. "I was writing about honesty and how it was important to me, and then I realized what I was writing wasn't really honest ... I was just saying the word honesty a lot and not really naming what that is." Fig. 2. *Inquiry*: Mirror; reflection. Intentional. Values-driven. Impervious to commercial qualifiers. Dwells in the curve of a question mark. Searching. Breaking its roots to grow



stronger. "I am grappling with heavy questions and this is exactly where I need to be. I always seem to have conversations at New Urban Arts when someone's articulating something that I've been thinking that makes perfect sense, but I've been mashing in my head for some time." Fig. 3. *In relation*: Intertwined; tangled. Listens for entrance. Awake to its surroundings. A joyful cacophony. Grows best in a committed embrace. Dwells in the sacred, and the shared. Can't survive a competitive environment. "I allow my ideas to expand with people. I know my voice is stronger with others. I don't need to be a singular voice. I don't need to shout." Fig. 4. *Shifting power dynamics*: Reluctant to impose or exert authority. Willing to be surprised. Vulnerable. Values a light footprint. "I didn't teach him to sing or dance, I exposed him to music. I gave him a pencil... and he started drawing." Fig. 5. *Wrestling with the structures of a hostile world*: Overwhelming doubt, isolated. Immersed. Dwells among weeds; longing for sky. Looking for language. "Am I only an artist? Is this all I am? Are we our creative practice? Or is that what we do?"

I VALUE HONESTY  
SO MUCH THAT  
NOT BEING HONEST  
WITH MYSELF AND  
WITH OTHERS MAKES  
ME ANXIOUS

MY STOMACH  
STARTS TO HURT  
AND THAT'S ALL I  
THINK ABOUT



I THINK IT'S  
LIKE

WHEN THERE'S A  
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN  
WHAT MY HEAD IS  
THINKING  
AND MY HEART IS  
FEELING



THE PROBLEM  
IS



HOW DO I KNOW WHICH  
IS RIGHT?

AND WHY DO  
THEY FEEL SO  
SEPARATE?

I ALMOST FEEL  
LIKE I'M



TWO SEPARATE PEOPLE  
RIGHT NOW

THERE'S THIS PERSON  
I WAS IN PROVIDENCE  
BEFORE - REALLY  
SOCIAL, ALWAYS  
HANGING OUT, (MAYBE  
TOO MUCH)

AND NOW WHAT I  
WANT IS TO MAKE  
A HOME, TO FEEL  
COMFORTABLE AND  
RELAXED HERE  
WITH CHUCK ....

HOW CAN I  
EXIST IN BOTH  
OF THOSE AT  
ONCE?

MAYBE BY STARTING  
WITH A SOLID  
KNOWLEDGE OF  
WHO I AM... AND

BY MAKING  
SURE I KEEP  
TALKING AND  
DON'T TRY TO WORK  
ALL THIS OUT IN  
MY HEAD ALONE.

ULTIMATELY,  
I TRUST MY  
HEART MORE  
THAN  
ANYTHING.

# TRUSTING THE HONESTY OF OUR OWN VOICES

Andrew Oesch

In conversation during the weekend of *The Institute of Other Significant Pursuits* an alumni mentor wondered aloud "How selfish do I feel around artmaking, especially in a community context?" I heard this thought echoed variously by many participants and felt the sentiment resonate with my own experiences as an Artist Educator at New Urban Arts and beyond. My own path to this type of work has encountered these tensions between self-interests and my role in the various communities in which I work, am a part of, or have been invited into as a guest. As I listened, I couldn't help but connect this question of self-interest with other queries mentors voiced about where and how to draw boundaries between our work and our selves. It became apparent that this negotiation of selfishness versus selflessness as well as that of individual versus group identity was on the minds of *The Institute* participants. All were embarking on making a home for themselves professionally and personally in various fields of arts mentoring and engaged community arts practice. They had clearly-articulated desires to create art in a context that is relationally driven, but this was leading to deep uncertainty with regard to the role of individual voice. These challenging questions were not the only characteristic of how they felt about this work. For me, the experience of these particular practices is marked by great joy, a joy which was affirmed by many over the weekend. And I would extend that affirmation to any creative practice, beautifully summarized in the words of bell hooks - "*Writing is my passion. It is a way to experience the ecstatic. The root understanding of the word ecstasy -- 'to stand outside' -- comes to me in those moments when I am immersed so deeply in the act of thinking and writing that everything else, even flesh, falls away.*"

Being an educator, and being an educator in the arts is an incredible experience. So is making, whether it be writing, drawing, printing, cooking... or teaching... I can be so engrossed when exploring questions with a group that I totally lose myself, everything drops away, and therefore I can be totally present to those people and the questions at hand. The power of this immersive joy is why I was disheartened to hear how balancing self, work, and community engagement were causing such turmoil and self-doubt amongst the cohort of *The Institute*. Even amidst this rewarding work of forging relationships through creative practice, mentors expressed hesitation and fear regarding the weight and presence of their own footprints.

I bore witness to a friend and peer sitting down with an earnest confidence to write reflectively about her practice, only to break into tears, her confidence and certainty having suddenly evaporated. Later, as the entire group discussed the writing exercise, the mentor said in that particular moment they had been contemplating honesty. Many in the group nodded, acknowledging an affinity to the potency and presence of that word in their own thinking. *"It is a source of anxiety. Am I being honest? Am I encouraging people to be honest? I am still figuring that out."*

What is it about the work of engaging through creative practice that makes us question our capability to be honest? Making an investigation similar to hooks' look at the word ecstasy, we find that *"honesty"* not only pertains to *"truthfulness"* but to the quality of *"being fair."* I have known this particular mentor for years, and I have never heard students or fellow mentors question her *truthfulness* or *fairness*. In fact, I would suggest the autobiographic qualities of her work epitomize a frankness and sincerity I associate with honesty. Which brings back bell hooks' quote about the ecstasy of her creative practice – *"...when I am immersed so deeply in the act of thinking and writing that everything else, even flesh, falls away."*

*Making*, which is to say the activity of creative process, can lay us bare. The way in which this ecstasy elevates and strips away, revealing potent expression, often demands deep personal inquiry, a self-questioning process that also elevates doubts and uncertainties. In sharing these deeply vulnerable processes with a larger group, we add additional audience to our personal quandaries and thus heighten the stakes of *truthfulness*. Not only is there the risk of presenting one's personal expression, but there is the additional process of sharing the journey by which one got there. How much of ourselves should we bring to the table? How much of ourselves is appropriate to reveal? At what point does this become a confessional... no longer about the learning space shared between mentor and student?

Another facet of the uncertainty surrounding the boundaries between ourselves and those we mentor was raised by someone pondering the role of neutrality in facilitation and teaching. Should we set ourselves aside? I am in agreement with the thinking of Myles Horton and Paulo Freire and a long list of folks who would say education is not neutral. And to teach and mentor the ecstatic processes of creative practices, how

could anyone be neutral? How could you leave behind the very characteristics of your own work? At the same time, how do you not let the very characteristics of your own voice get in the way? The work experience of two mentors illuminated this question about fairness and parity more deeply. One was working at an arts organization serving adults with developmental disabilities; the other was working to edit a documentary project she had begun while living abroad. Both were concerned about the ethics surrounding the power of expression, wondering how to be fair within the contexts in which they were working. New to working with adults with developmental disabilities, the mentor felt afraid of imposing her voice because of her clients' obstacles to accessing their voices in the same way. Wondering if making herself too present would further hinder those who already struggled to make their desires known, she asked, *"At what point am I being too selfish by initiating projects?"*

Immersed in the process of choosing what pieces of video, photography, and audio to include in the completed film documentary piece, the other mentor worried about how these decisions would represent the stories of those portrayed. The mentor's process while working abroad had included giving the group she was working with cameras to capture their stories, a shared process of collecting. But now, having returned home, the mentor felt isolated in the process of editing, and fearful of the responsibility to represent her collaborators and subject matter.

Both wondered how they should bring themselves to the work. Somehow the context of collaboration, with its inherent dynamics of power, meant that their own voices shouldn't be there, or should at least be diminished. But they were there. They were a part of this process; they were contributing their expertise and training to tell stories and express ideas. At the same time, there was a sense of being apart from and outside of, raising questions about the honesty, fairness, and representation of the process. But to set themselves aside, and not acknowledge their own presence ignores the power of external voice in the realization of a given idea. While not fully addressing the complexity of navigating this terrain, one mentor elegantly described this process as *"Offering with little expectation over time, participating in community."*

I have personally come to an understanding that the boundaries between my individual work, the work I do as a community arts practitioner, and the work I do as an artist

educator are not separate. The description is a much more muddled Yogi Berra-ism sounding something like, "*How I do what I do is what I do, but might not be all of who I am.*" Still, I am drawn to these strands of questions about boundaries. I feel a desire within to simultaneously divide myself up and draw disparate aspects together, hoping that through the creation of distinct definitions and unified connections I can present a picture of self-clarity. But I know that a clear picture might not always be the most honest one, and though it is immensely challenging to sit with an ambiguous image, holding multiple definitions is a fuller representation of complex truths.

A mentor expressed the hopes of his creative practices to be "*seeking spontaneous interactions with knowns and unknowns.*" This begins to delineate the varied collection of understanding and questioning which portrays deep self-knowledge...the sort of depth which is necessary for meaningful relationships and meaningful creative practice. Getting to this depth is continuous work, perpetually naming and confronting certainties and uncertainties. Witnessing the honesty and inhibition of so many mentors at the Institute, I do wonder if the deep doubt generated by constant questioning actually moves our practices forward... but Emmy Bright continually reminds me that the reciprocal quality to doubt is faith. I imagine that a faith in our ability to be honest and to model practices of honesty will lead us to an inevitable growth of our shared experiences of ecstasy.

So right from the start we wanna know -  
What are the questions and hopes you have brought for the weekend?

I hope I get more sustenance from sharing  
this weekend with everyone here.

I hope I feel encouraged and strengthened  
when I think about my calling and following  
my heart.

Does anyone else feel overwhelmed with  
the desire to bust your heart open and  
let everything, good and bad, live inside?

# PLACEMAKING

Restricted / small, stuck - community

↳ normative values of communities that we enter

different kinds of communities -  
marriage...

normative values - standard structure - of community

↳ responds to cues

↳ spaciousness w/ in communities that seem

structured  
actually



bravery

↳ I love being in

boxes. → stretch limits of boxes

☆ part of being in places → creativity

spaciousness in constrained spaces.

as a teaching artist - entering the structure -  
still have to go in and do what you do.

RUBBER BOY

↳ pressure on  
expressiveness

don't be afraid to be  
embarrassed

(cultivate  
outlandishness)

↳ meant: a foreign, strange  
space - somebody  
who's not who you are

(bored with  
being  
mediocre)

↳ bending to customs  
while still being  
outlandish

RISK

*i am convinced  
in order to create  
something, we must  
start creating.*



NO MATTER WHERE I WANDERED TO OR HOW LONG I LOST MYSELF, I ALWAYS ENDED UP COMING BACK TO NEW URBAN ARTS TO REMIND MYSELF OF WHAT HAD BEEN ROOTED IN MY SOUL. THE ART IN BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, EXPLORATION, TELLING STORIES... I HAVE TO REMEMBER THAT THIS IS NOT A PHASE I'M GOING THROUGH. MY STYLE OF TEACHING IS NOT A PHASE EITHER. EVEN THOUGH MY TEN YEARS OF TEACHING HAVEN'T ALL BEEN AT NEW URBAN ARTS, THE SPIRIT OF NEW URBAN ARTS WAS WITH ME. I WILL CONTINUE TO CARRY THIS SPECIAL THING WITH ME AS I COMMIT MYSELF TO TEACHING ABOUT CREATIVE PRACTICE. THIS IS IMPORTANT AS THERE ARE PEOPLE OUT THERE WAITING FOR ME TO GUIDE THEM IN MAKING THEIR OWN MEANINGS.

I DIDN'T TEACH MY SON TO SING OR DANCE, I EXPOSED HIM TO MUSIC. I GAVE HIM A PENCIL AND HE STARTED DRAWING WHEN I TEACH KINDERGARTNERS ART, I DON'T PUT THE CRAYON IN THEIR HAND AND MOVE THEIR HAND, I GIVE THEM THE TOOLS. ~~THAT~~ THEY LET ME COME TO THEM AS THEY ARE READY.

-JENN RICE



Jenn

Sharing objects with the group  
relationships between mentors/teachers  
+ students

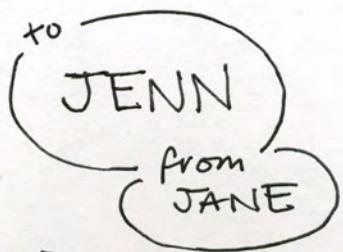
This idea of translation  
art making for self, art making  
as with and for other people.

Act as a way to teach social  
skills

Making art together w child  
"I didn't teach him how to  
sing + dance" - letting  
people figure out  
their own paths.

helping children find their  
independence - Exploration  
Teacher as provider of tools

Embodied making  
I let him paint my body



learning  
THROUGH  
personal  
MEANING.  
personal  
REFLECTION.

MENTORING  
-----  
PARENTING

QUESTION:  
how do  
you find  
time for  
personal  
work?

↓  
providing  
a space of  
for creativity  
(i.e. DANCING)  
not dictating  
it.

i don't need to  
be a singular  
voice. i don't  
need to shout.

my voice is  
stronger with  
others.

HOW CAN I SIMULTANEOUSLY TAKE PART IN SEEMINGLY OPPOSING FORCES?

I'VE BEEN WONDERING HOW TO DEAL WITH INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE WHERE I WORK AT AN AGENCY FOR ADULTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES. PARTICIPANTS CAN EXPERIMENT WITH MANY DIFFERENT MEDIA IN A SAFE SPACE WHERE THEY TAKE CREATIVE RISKS AND EXPLORE THEIR PASSIONS. UNFORTUNATELY, THE MISSION OF THE PROGRAM, WHICH IS TO PROVIDE SUPPORT TO PEOPLE WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES THROUGH THE ARTS, RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING, AND JOB-COACHING IS LOST TO FRUSTRATION AND ANGER. EMPHASIS IS PLACED ON HEIRARCHY AMONG EMPLOYEES, CAUSING THEM TO LOSE SIGHT OF THEIR PASSION AND INSTEAD ENGAGE IN CONSTANT ADMINISTRATIVE POWER-STRUGGLES WHICH DISCOURAGE EMPLOYEES FROM WORKING TOGETHER, SUPPORTING EACH OTHER, AND GROWING.

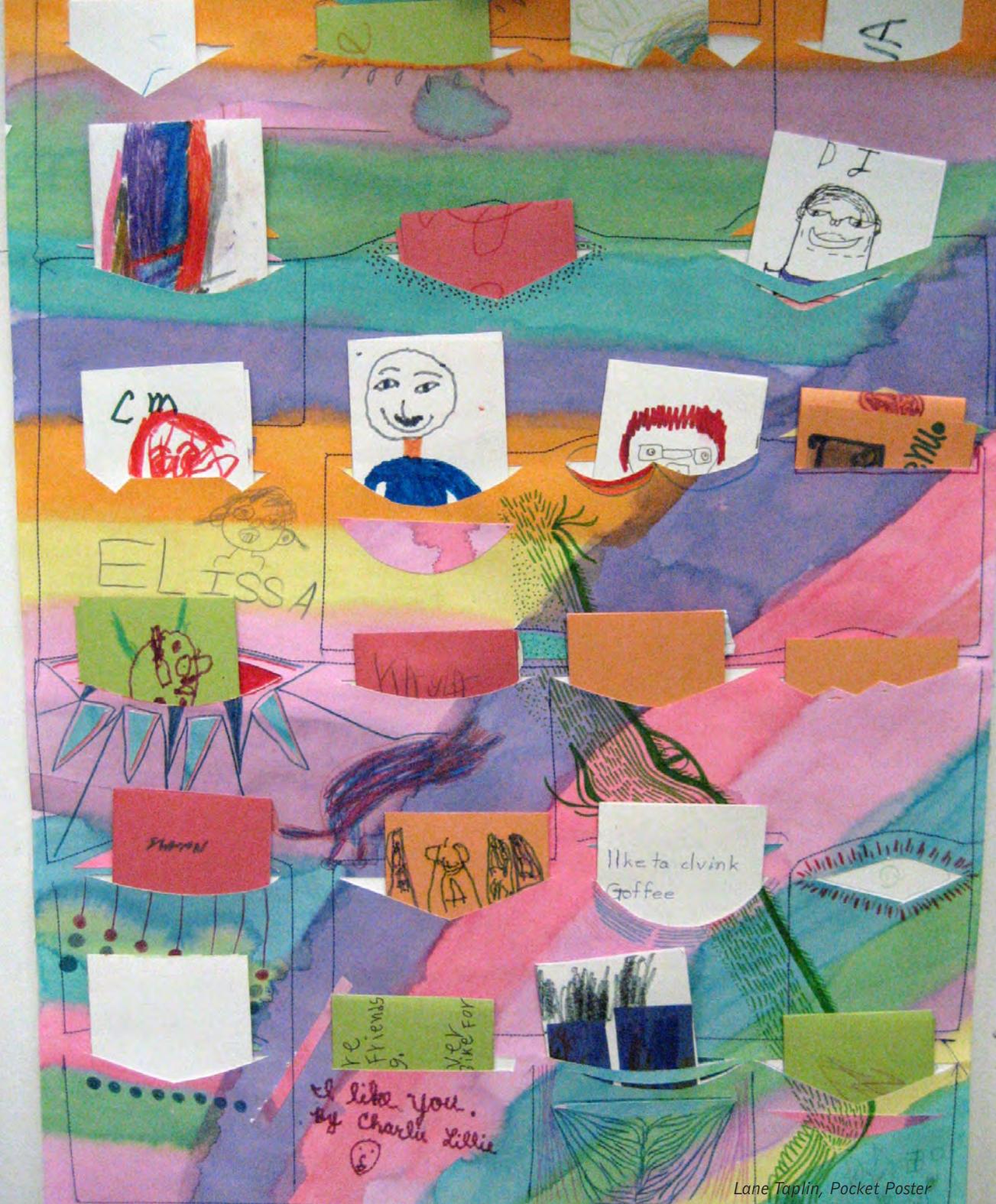
OVER TIME MY ANGER AND FRUSTRATIONS GREW BECAUSE I, ALONE, COULD NOT MAKE THE AMBITIOUS, AND SOMETIMES EVEN VERY SMALL POSITIVE CHANGES I HAD HOPED FOR. I WAS OVERWHELMED, AND THE MORE INVOLVED I BECAME IN THE INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE OF THE SPACE, THE FURTHER AWAY I STRAYED FROM MY CREATIVE PRACTICE AS A FACILITATOR.

AS A GROUNDING EXERCISE, MY CLIENTS AND I CREATED A "POCKET POSTER" ABOUT OURSELVES. EACH PERSON MADE A CARD WITH DRAWINGS AND WRITINGS ABOUT WHO THEY ARE, WHAT THEY LOVE, AND THEIR INSPIRATIONS. EACH CARD NOW LIVES IN A POCKET ON THE POSTER, WHICH I CHOSE TO HANG IN OUR STAFF ROOM, WHERE MY CO-WORKERS, MANY OF WHOM ARE ALSO FACING SIMILAR FRUSTRATIONS REGARDING INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE, CAN SPEND A MOMENT WITH A CARD FROM THE POSTER.

PULLING OUT SOMEONES' CARD IS AN INTIMATE ACT THAT REMINDS ME THAT I AM NOT WORKING FOR MY BOSS, BUT FOR MY CLIENTS, WHO ARE ALSO MY PEERS, COLLABORATORS, STUDENTS, TEACHERS, FRIENDS, ETC. MY LOVE FOR THESE PEOPLE AND FOR SHARING CREATIVITY AMONGST OURSELVES IS WHERE I FIND MYSELF MOST ALIVE.

IT MAY BE THAT I NEVER FIND A WAY TO BALANCE THE OBSTACLE OF INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE AND MY ROLE AS A CREATIVE FACILITATOR. BUT IT IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL THAT IN MY SEARCH FOR THIS BALANCE I AM ABLE TO CONTINUE THE CYCLE OF GIVING, RECEIVING, AND GROWING THAT KEEPS ME, MY CREATIVE PRACTICE, AND THE CREATIVE PRACTICE OF OTHERS ALIVE AND THRIVING.

-LANE TAPLIN



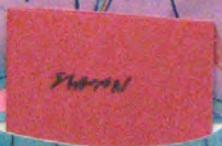
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ELISSA



I like to drink Goffee



re Friends  
VERY FINE FOX



I like you.  
By Charlu Lillie  
☺

The background of the image is a repeating floral pattern in shades of gray. It features stylized roses, leaves, and scrolling vines. The text is overlaid on this pattern.

ALLOWING  
MY IDEAS

**TO EXPAND  
WITH PEOPLE**

When I was a  
kid, I thought I  
had this power  
where I could  
look at anyone



The first time I  
went to a big  
city, there was so  
much to look  
at I thought I  
might explode.



All of that intake  
was so  
important.



and imagine exactly  
what it would be like  
to be them. I mean  
physically - to have  
their body, be wearing  
their clothes, etc.



I've spent so much  
time looking at the  
world, searching for  
other people's stories  
and jokes, taking in  
everything,



Now I think that  
it's finally  
time



I spent a lot of  
time alone in the  
woods as a kid.

instead of letting  
myself be alone in  
the woods.

~~That intake~~



for some  
output.

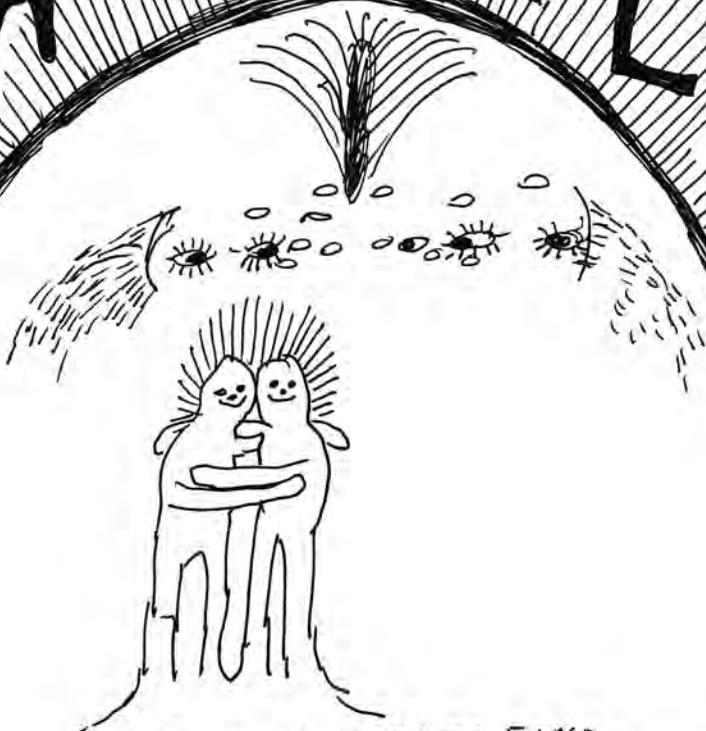


## **CONNECTING NARRATIVES**

Illustrations by Caitlin Cali

The following illustrations share stories from Connecting Narratives, a public storytelling night presented by the *Institute of Other Significant Pursuits* in which alumni artist mentors shared stories of New Urban Arts in a way that they'd never been told before. The event was an effort to make new meaning from their New Urban Arts experiences, while also revealing an inside look into the complexities of community arts practice for an audience of over 50 people interested in alternative models for teaching, learning and artmaking.

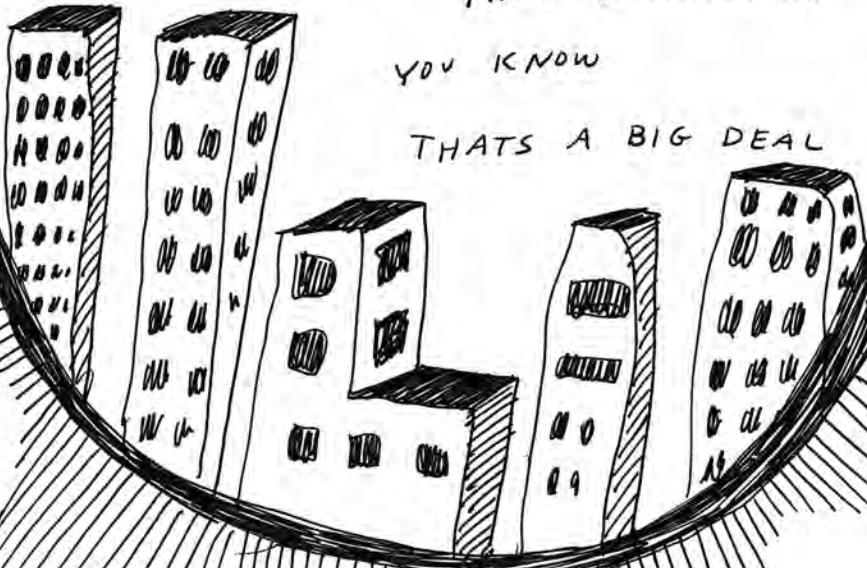
# A B E L L



IF I CAN TRY TO FIND  
THAT CONNECTION

YOU KNOW

THATS A BIG DEAL





ANDREW

SO MOVED BY THIS PLACE

THANK GOODNESS ILL NEVER BE A TEENAGER AGAIN  
NO ITS FUNNY

K2IR TOY

WERDNA

2UOJUBM  
20AHC

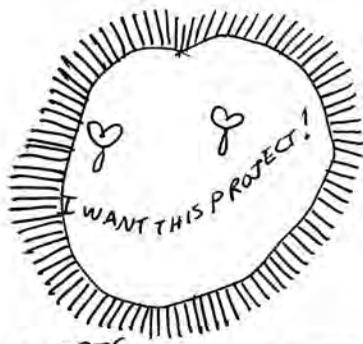
RISK JOY

YOU DONT TALK  
TO US ANYMORE  
YOU JUST SIT  
HERE AND  
PRINT

DUDE THATS RACIST

WHAT THE  
FUXX?

NEBULOUS  
CHAOS



NEW URBAN ARTS  
MADE/ALLOWED ME TO BE SELFISH  
THE EXPERIENCE AT NUA  
WAS INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT  
TO ME



GOD DO THIS





# KEDRIN STORIES



SWEET SWEET LOVE

## 3 MAN LAWS:

RULE # 1  
IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU.

RULE # 2  
DONT TRY TO REASON

RULE # 3:

IF YOU ASK A GIRL  
IF SHE'S HUNGRY,  
SHE'LL SAY NO.  
IF YOU ASK  
IF SHE WANTS  
SOME FOOD,  
YOU'RE GONNA GO  
GET SOME.

IF YOU SIT WITH SOME FRIES, SHE'LL EAT THEM ALL



MICHAEL JACKSON



# MELISSA

NO, THATS NOT WHAT I MEAN TO  
TALK ABOUT BUT IT WAS  
REALLY COOL



OH MY GOD IS THAT A SNAKE?  
IS THAT A BUG ON ME?

NOW WHAT DO WE DO?

GO BACK TO THE CAMP.

WE WERE FACILITATING THIS JOURNEY THROUGH  
THE DARK, BUT IN RETROSPECT, THEY DIDNT  
NEED US. THEY HAD THE TOOLS  
FOR THAT JOURNEY

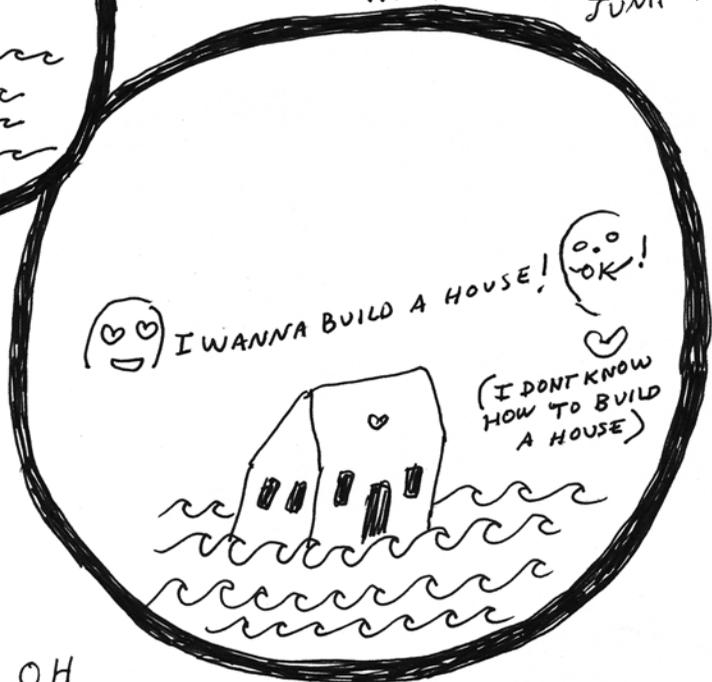
# ZACH

ADVENTURE!



I DONT KNOW HOW I GOT HERE

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN  
WHEN YOU JUST  
JUMP IN



I WANNA BUILD A HOUSE!

(I DONT KNOW  
HOW TO BUILD  
A HOUSE)

OH,  
I LEARNED HOW TO NOT  
THINK AT ALL AT  
NEW URBAN ARTS

# AH HA MOMENT

Kedrin Frias

If you walk into any kindergarten classroom and find rolled out sheets of paper on the floor with a bucket of crayons or pencils, I am certain you would not have to give instructions in order for any of the children to understand that it is time to draw.

The urge to communicate with others by making something is almost primitive. I think this is why most children get excited about drawing and cannot wait to be creative. It makes them feel good and provides another way to communicate. It is a necessary part of their education to have time and space to make art. However, this is not the common sentiment among most fifteen year-olds.

There is a shift in values during the teenage years, which almost completely kicks all of the old values to the curb. It is no longer cool or important to communicate visually, or at least not as much as before. Art is only a practice for those who are considered talented. Teens feel self-conscious about anything and everything. "What will people think?" "What will people say?" "What if my artwork isn't perfect?" These are just a few of the questions and doubts hammered into our youth during the middle school years. Most young people quit learning art, music and even sports at this age because they think that if they are not already "very talented" at one of these things, they shouldn't bother pursuing them any further.

These insecurities establish formidable walls between a teacher and his/her students. As such, it then becomes the teacher's job to begin removing bricks. New Urban Arts is a place where we demolish walls of insecurity, rebuild trust and confidence in students' lives and restore youth to a sense of ownership and participation in the world in which they live. We accomplish this by building relationships.

Students come to studio of their own free will and give away entire afternoons to sit with a mentor and become friends. This happens when our mentors take a genuine interest in their students, seeking to help them succeed in their personal, school, artistic and future goals. Essentially, mentoring happens when adults begin to genuinely care about young people. The students at New Urban Arts are not enrolling in an art

class with a beginning and an end. Likewise, they are not working in order to receive a grade. Instead, they come in each day because they want to be here.

Whether a one-on-one relationship or small group interaction, we strive to focus first on our students' needs and later on the production of artworks. This allows the student to feel more important than any painting, drawing or screen print. This has proven to be the best way to cultivate community, lay the foundation for artmaking and provide a safe and inviting space in our community. In our organization this has been evidenced by the exponential growth and high retention rates we have experienced in student enrollment each year, accomplished primarily by word-of-mouth invitation.

So is this all really relevant? Is this all just a sentimental account of an after-school experience? Surely not! New Urban Arts has grown from a simple after-school arts program into a thriving, growing, learning community of artists and educators who are seeking to make sense of their world. All who come through our doors enter with heavy loads placed on them by home, work, school and life. One of our values in the studio is the idea of RISK, and how without it, there can be no true learning in one's life. This is not something we merely teach, but it is a value that is modeled and remodeled every day. Our students, mentors, staff and even passers-by all learn that this is a safe place to experiment, make mistakes and especially to try, and try again.

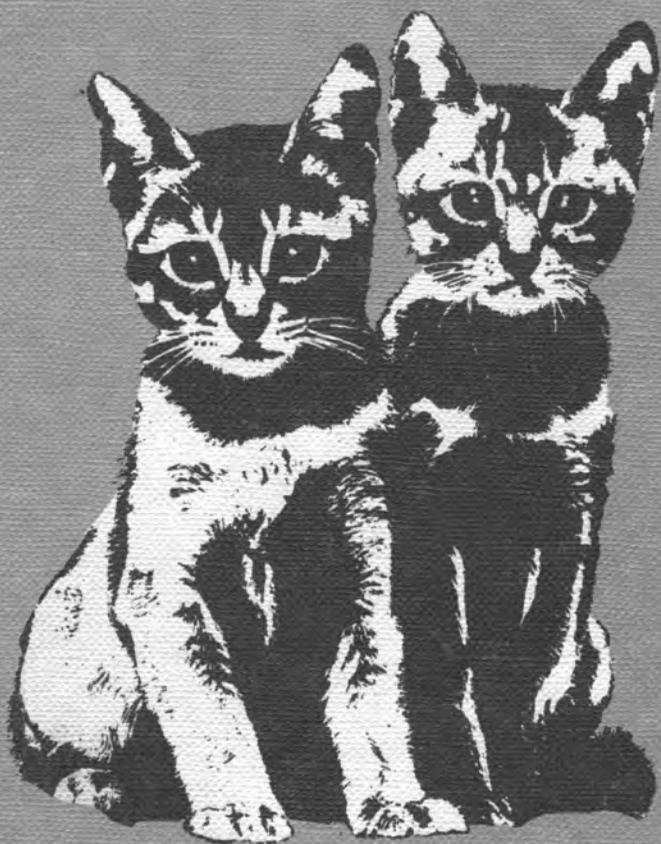
We assume the role of mentor as adults with presumed experience and knowledge. Students come to us filled with insecurities and doubts about everything, looking for guidance. We strive to offer this and to help them achieve their goals. Along the way we have small successes that affirm the value of our accumulated experience, particularly in the students' eyes.

In the company of alumni mentors during the *Institute of Other Significant Pursuits*, however, I was surprised to learn that even after many years of adulthood and mentoring we often leave the studio feeling like we know nothing. Effectively, this leads us to assume the role of student once again, filled with insecurity and doubt ourselves. This concept is both very cool and very frustrating; cool because it is a constant reminder that we always have something new to learn, frustrating because it reminds us there are no tangible ladder rungs in the journey of life. It is all malleable and up to interpretation by the individual.

This unexpected phenomenon bears fruit not only in students' lives, but also in mentors' lives. Just like our students, our mentors weather changes and experience growth spurts. They often enter with a particular set of thoughts on what it is to mentor youth through art. Mentors come with plans to teach and share artistic skills and quickly learn that high school students care more about knowing them as people than about what they can do. This realization often surfaces as a frustrating but valuable growing pain, as it teaches our mentors to focus first on getting to know the students, before deciding what to offer them. Our artist mentors usually have an *ah ha* moment when they come to understand that relationships must be the foundation upon which any successful educational or artistic experiences are built. For me, this has transpired as a long chain of encounters that have encouraged me to question my own ideas with regard to self, education and art.

In this way, the students are mentoring their mentors. This cycle of artists, teachers and learners constantly serving each other in beautiful ways serves as a vital model of exchange in our community.

**how do i  
practice  
what i  
feel?**



## FACILITATORS & STAFF

Former co-executive director of the Rhode Island Service Alliance, **Rick Benjamin** teaches poetry and community practice at RISD, Brown and Goddard College. He received a Ph.D. in Literature from Rutgers University. He is a practicing Buddhist.

**Emmy Bright** is an artist and educator whose interests extend beyond the studio and classroom. Her work in arts education spans the field: artist and arts administrator, board member and teaching artist, art teacher, researcher, program evaluator, and theorist. She has studied, exhibited, taught, performed, coordinated, and created in all of the places where she's lived, including New Haven, Chicago, Cambridge, and Dutchess County, NY. She has also collaborated with others in making learning visible in a variety of spaces including gardens, classrooms, and conferences. Currently, she is working as an Arts Mentoring Fellow at New Urban Arts, a Field Interviewer for the Teaching Artist Research Project of the University of Chicago, and as a Curriculum Advisor for the ArtScience Prize in Boston, MA. She holds a B.A. in Art History from University of Chicago, many hours in the School of the Art Institute studios, and an M.Ed in Arts in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. There she focused on the arts, identity, gender and childhood. Her past two summers have been spent working in papermaking and printmaking residencies at The Penland School of Craft. Her creative practice has a dual focus: one eye in the studio and the other one in social spaces like the community and the classroom. In both, she values the process of work unfolding, often unexpectedly. She likes to play with the found and the funny and with others. Her studio work has both sculptural and print strands and occasionally includes performances. An ongoing art project of hers involves intense data collection and documentation around social interactions. Visit <http://emmybright.com>.

**Bill Eyman** began teaching as a high school Spanish teacher in a small rural school in Ohio in 1962. In the late 70's he came to Providence to work at the Providence Mental Health Center (now The Providence Center), as liaison between the center and the Providence School Department. Ten years later and a hundred years wiser, he began work in the Office of Special Needs at the Rhode Island Department of Education. Here he worked with over two hundred schools and agencies, focusing on Social and Emotional Literacy, the professional term for "how to get along and work together

whether you like each other or not,” as one of his students interprets it. One of the results of his forty-five year career is the understanding that education is a science and an art, but mostly an art. He is now retired, consulting for community-based programs that serve youth and their families.

**Kedrin Frias** was born and raised in Providence, RI. He has formally studied drawing, painting, ceramics, sculpture (wood, clay, and metal) and printmaking. Yet when describing himself as an artist, he uses the words observer, detective, scientist, and problem solver. He first arrived at New Urban Arts as a student, and his work was featured in the first art exhibition ever at New Urban Arts. He later returned ready to volunteer as an Artist Mentor during his sophomore year at Rhode Island College and remained an artist mentor for the next seven years. He has worked with various youth organizations including the Steel Yard, where he initiated one of the first youth community art courses; Providence CityArts; Youth in Action; Rhode Island for Community & Justice; English for Action; and the Paul Cuffee Charter School. He has led many community mural projects, including the Mu Crew at New Urban Arts in 2009, a six-week summer program in which high school students painted an outdoor mural for the John Hope Settlement House through the funding from the President’s American Recovery and Reinvestment Act on behalf of the Providence Arts Culture and Tourism Department and Workforce Solutions of Providence/Cranston. Kedrin has mentored students who have had no studio art experience, as well as students who have prepared portfolios for the top art schools in the country. They have gone on to earn many accomplishments, including returning to become artist mentors at New Urban Arts themselves. Kedrin has a degree in studio art and an art teaching certification for grades K-12. He has used art to work with students with learning disabilities at both the Paul Cuffee Charter School, and Highlander Charter School. He currently substitute teaches for the Providence Public Schools.

**Pete Hocking** is an interdisciplinary artist, activist, and teacher who lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island. His studio practice is primarily concerned with personal narrative and the construction of identity within the context of contemporary social and political life. He has worked with dozens of non-profit organizations as a partner, board member and strategic planning leader, including New Urban Arts, Community MusicWorks, Project Eye-to-Eye and Equity Action, Southside Community Land

Trust, AIDS Project Rhode Island, and The Rhode Island Council for the Humanities. From 2007 until 2011 he served the interim director of Rhode Island School of Design's Office of Public Engagement. Prior to that, for over seventeen years, he was on the staff of the Howard R. Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown University, where he served as director from 1992 to 2005. As the Swearer Center's director and as an Associate Dean of the College, he worked to develop university-community partnerships, innovative leadership pedagogy, undergraduate research opportunities, social entrepreneur projects, and to integrate community-based learning with academic study. Currently, he offers courses in social practices in the arts, leadership, queer studies, and ecology/sustainability at Rhode Island School of Design and is a faculty member in Goddard College's MFA in Interdisciplinary Art program. Visit [www.pete-hocking.com](http://www.pete-hocking.com). At New Urban Arts he was an Artist Mentor Fellow from 2007-2009 and currently serves as a Community Story Teller.

**Tamara Kaplan** started working at New Urban Arts ten years ago as Program Director, and now is Operations Director. She received an M.A. with a specialization in Museum Education and M.A.T. certification in K-12 arts education from The Rhode Island School of Design. Her graduate thesis was an in-depth look at how art museums can access new audiences by engaging teaching artists to develop work in communities not usually engaged in museum visits.

As a coordinator, teacher, and documentarian, **Jori Ketten** has been fortunate to work extensively with the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University, RISD's Project Open Door, the Providence Black Repertory Company, Community MusicWorks and the Providence Youth Arts Collaborative organizations (Providence, RI); the Harvard School of Public Health (Boston, MA); the Point CDC (Bronx, NY); and Liz Lerman Dance Exchange (Washington, D.C.). Jori is grappling with documentation as artistic practice and also wondering what it means for documentation to be thoughtfully incorporated into youth arts organizations' teaching methodologies.

**Deborah Obalil** is a former chair of New Urban Arts and has fifteen years experience as an arts manager and organizational development specialist. She was most recently the Executive Director of the Alliance of Artists Communities and currently serves as the Board President of Rhode Island Citizens for the Arts. She has taught at the

School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Arts Administration department, at Columbia College Chicago in the Arts, Entertainment & Media Management department and Rhode Island School of Design in the Graduate Studies department.

**Andrew Oesch** sees learning as a space for expansive collaborative making. Past projects with students have ranged from exploring oral histories of families and communities to transforming the classroom environment through costumes and temporary installations. He is interested in moments when many meanings pile up, particularly through social and art/design mediums. The processes and work surrounding these moments are messy, ephemeral, ambiguous, and a great deal of fun. Andrew has held many teaching artist residencies at community organizations and schools, including New Urban Arts, Providence City Arts, Olneyville Community School, Bridgham Middle School and English for Action. Currently he is working at The Learning Community in Central Falls as a 7th grade Teaching Artist in addition to being an Artist Educator at the RISD Museum and co-running a series of comic book workshops at the Providence Community Libraries. From 2006 to 08 Andrew was an Arts Mentoring Fellow at New Urban Arts. Visit <http://www.andrewoesch.com/>

**Sarah Meyer** has been New Urban Arts Program Director since 2005, where she has developed many new initiatives including the Summer Art Inquiry, the annual All Night Art Lock-In, the Art Party, the Untitlement Project, the Arts Mentoring Fellowship and the Studio Team Advisory Board. Previously, Sarah worked with Young Chicago Authors towards building the youth writing community which included Louder Than A Bomb; the Chicago Teen Poetry Festival; GirlSpeak, a webzine of and by young women writers; and Youthology, a summer program that culminated in a multimedia performance exploring societal notions and stereotypes of youth culture. As an educator and youth advocate, Sarah works to develop supportive environments that engage youth in creative inquiry and personal development. As a recipient of the Arts in Youth and Community Development Fellowship, she completed coursework for her Masters in Arts Management from Columbia College, Chicago. She first studied community-building strategies with her mother, whose mentorship sparked annual Snowflake Nights every December. She craves and cradles the company of books that speak to community and creative practice. Here's a peak inside her bookshelf: <http://www.insidemysbookshelf.blogspot.com>.

# SCHEDULE OVERVIEW

## FRIDAY, AUGUST 27

7:00-9:00pm Welcome Dinner

## SATURDAY, AUGUST 28

10:00-11:00 Welcome, Breakfast, Introductions

11:00-12:30 Workshops

*Strategic & Business Planning* with Deborah Obalil

*Facilitation* with Bill Eyman & Tamara Kaplan

12:30-1:30 Lunch

1:30-4:00 Presentations: Reflecting Our Practices

*Share 3 objects, share assignment and receive written responses on notecards reflecting back themes heard from cohort*

4:00-4:10 BREAK

4:10-4:45 What are the qualities of your practices/pursuits/questions?

4:45-5:00 BREAK

5:00-6:30 Workshops

*Placemaking & Entering a Community* with Rick Benjamin

*Deep Documentation* with Emmy Bright & Jori Ketten

7:00-9:00 Dinner at Peter's House with Special Guests

## SUNDAY, AUGUST 29

10:00-11:00 Breakfast, Warm-Up Game, Pecha Kucha Presentations

11:00-12:00 Interviews

12:00-1:30 Workshops

*Progressive Education Pedagogy* with Peter Hocking

*Grantwriting 201: Learn "Grant Speak" in a Context that has Personal Meaning* with Jason Yoon

1:30-2:30 Lunch

2:30-4:30 Mapping Origins & Uncertain Horizons Artmaking

4:30-5:00 Break / Prep for Event

5:00-7:00 Public Storytelling Event - Connecting Narratives

7:00-9:00 Dinner at Emmy's House with Special Guests

MONDAY, AUGUST 30, 11:00AM-4:30PM

11:00-11:45 Breakfast, Warm-Up, Pecha Kucha Presentations

11:45-1:15 Writing practice statements

1:15-2:00 Working Lunch

2:00-3:25 Presentations: share written statements with the group.

3:25-4:45 Reflection: bookmaking / highlighting workbook notes

4:45-5:30 Where do we go from here? What questions are you leaving with?

## PURPOSE AND CONTEXT

The *Institute of Other Significant Pursuits* is a new initiative at New Urban Arts dedicated to supporting alumni artist mentors in their work beyond the walls of our community art studio in Providence, RI. During the summer of 2010, ten alumni mentors from across five states were invited to reconnect through workshops, discussions, and artmaking. This group of emerging arts leaders and educators met for three intensive days over the last weekend in August. Together, they explored issues of artistic practice, teaching practice, nonprofit management, institutional culture, community building and social change through the lens of their experiences at New Urban Arts.

*The Institute* is a first step in providing people who have been profoundly affected by their experience at New Urban Arts to translate those experiences into real influence and impact in the world, making explicit tacit knowledge from their shared understanding of something that cannot easily be captured or codified. *The Institute* becomes a think tank and closely-knit cohort for pulling apart ideas, and digging deeper in a trusting and supportive space.

New Urban Arts not only considered *The Institute* professional development for alumni artist mentors, but also a significant learning opportunity for the organization itself. By bringing alumni mentors together, we had an opportunity to tell the story of New Urban Arts in the work that people do outside New Urban Arts. It was a chance to further articulate how we do what we do, and to inform our practices through the growing mentor knowledge base.

In the development of *The Institute*, through six months of planning, staff at New Urban Arts researched low-residency graduate programs that are based around short-term in-person intensives, augmented by year-long support, as well as non-degreed, alternative learning communities that offer an intense immersion, such as Black Mountain College. We were particularly drawn to BMC for its informal and collaborative spirit and a willingness to 'let things happen.' Also appealing was the notion that a learning community can acquire legitimacy not only through accreditation, but through the work of its students, teachers and alumni. The relationships and unexpected connections formed at Black Mountain have had lasting influence on American culture and the arts.

We interviewed alumni artist mentors to better understand their desires for a continued relationship with New Urban Arts, and to find out what kind of professional development support they sought. Alumni mentors described urgency for discourse among like-minded artists and educators, and feedback and direction on work they find themselves doing in isolation. They also requested help with career sustainability, including gaining a better understanding for the emerging field of community-based arts and education. Mostly, they had questions around how to continue their work at New Urban Arts in their new communities. As one comic artist shared, “I want my creative practice to be about more than just me drawing by myself.”

We continually revisited the core values and best practices at New Urban Arts in the development of *The Institute*, to maintain a reflective and responsive learning environment, rather than recycle a traditional conference framework and agenda. The pilot year documentation was also designed to reflect the New Urban Arts studio ethos: exuberant, nebulous, and, as a recent student described our space, “a chaos to be memorized.”

## IN CLOSING

Tyler Denmead, New Urban Arts Founder

I think one assumption I always made is that I wouldn't really understand New Urban Arts until I left.

It's hard, if not impossible, to describe and make sense of something when one is immersed in it. And for me and I think many others, New Urban Arts is an undoubtedly a very immersive place. Time stands still and time flies at New Urban Arts.

Another reason might be that it's a complicated place. It's attempting to create conditions in which people might make their distinctive mark on the world. If distinctive, then we might not possess the vocabularies that feel adequate enough yet to describe what we observe and experience in the studio. We have to search for metaphors that attempt to bridge what we feel we understand and that which we do not. Metaphors are muddy. Whilst immersed at New Urban Arts, I spent most of the time feeling like I did not understand, and I mean that in the most positive sense.

A third reason, which is probably enough for now, is that part of the experience of New Urban Arts is leaving the place. Students do it when they graduate from high school, some artist mentors do it every year, some leave and come back, and all of us in some way are on our way out the door.

In the end, what I have delightfully discovered since leaving, is that there is still not a final vocabulary that feels adequate enough to describe the place. And in this sense, the place remains generative. My memories of my own encounters there continue to throw curve balls, provoke new questions, invite me to recast them in a different light. I think this is an indication of its complexity, relevance, and importance when I was there --- and the fact that it continues to outdo itself on each of these fronts.

So, it's a funny title, 'The Institute of Other Significant Pursuits'. It reminds us that as alumni of New Urban Arts, we are engaging with otherness, in pursuance of new ways of relating to the world. It reminds us how New Urban Arts remains significant in those pursuits.

Perhaps by describing and experiencing that significance in new ways, perhaps we are laying the foundation for this ongoing experimentation and pursuing. And of course, there's this sense of irony in the title. It's as if this *Institute* would have a hand-painted sign tacked onto a triangle pediment resting on some big stone columns.

Perhaps this reflects some ambivalence toward describing ourselves in ways that become fixed and binding, some ambivalence toward institutions that don't change their vocabularies (this is different from updating their marketing materials, I think).

We want our vocabularies to remain somewhat contingent. We want to continue to experiment in how we might make that distinctive mark. We are not looking for the final say, that perfectly symmetrical and timeless building. We want to hang signs we can rip down.

We continue to look toward the future, toward greater opportunities for personal self-fulfillment and social justice. Even in the case of New Urban Arts' alumni program, it's still oriented toward the future.



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