

Art and Social Justice Education Culture as Commons



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WHATEVER COMES NEXT WILL
BE MADE AND NAMED BY US

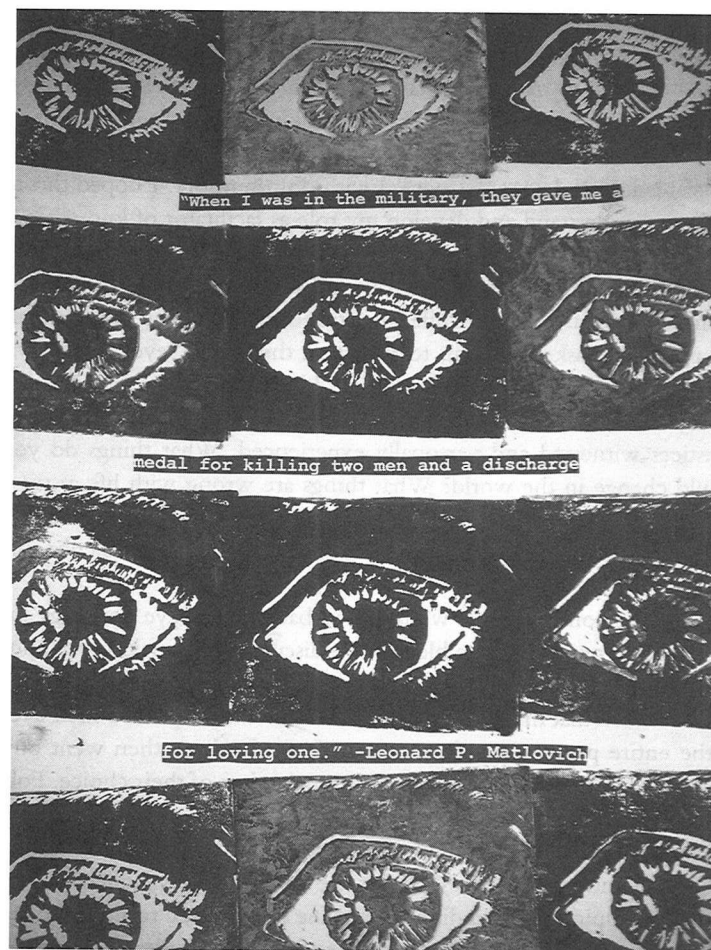
Vanessa López-Sparaco

The first word that both my mother and I spoke in English was *acorn*. I was 6 years old; she was 38 years old. I grew up having to read and write for most of my elders who did not understand the language or the pace and structure of American culture, life, and its various systems. I made it through school, when so many others around me failed, because luck upheld my smarts. I had a few teachers who pitied me and even fewer that understood me. I needed an education that valued the strength within my struggle. I needed my experience to “coexist in a nonhierarchical way with the other ways of knowing” (hooks, 1994, p. 84). I needed my experience to be valued.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks articulates the difference between education as a practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce dominance (1994, p. 4). I teach because I fundamentally believe teaching is a form of active resistance and responsible revolution. I teach because I believe that education is political and thus power and dominance are inherent in its practice. It is imperative that we teach about and for social justice to create not only awareness, but balance.

Social justice is about creating for our students a sense of connection and responsibility to community and relevancy to the world around them. As an art educator, I believe the discipline must be tied to action in the world in a way that empowers students. Like me, many of my students have lived experiences that are not valued within the typical school setting. My classroom must then be the place that challenges hegemony and values multiple ways of knowing.

I currently teach at Roland Park Elementary Middle School (RPEMS). RPEMS is a large urban, public school located in Baltimore, Maryland. There are approximately 1200 students attending RPEM. Fifty percent of the students are African-American, 40 percent are Caucasian, 8 percent are Asian, almost 2 percent are Hispanic, and less than 1 percent are American Indian. In a segregated city, our school is truly diverse.



Maggie Rattie, *Leonard P. Matlovich*, June 2010, print media, 12 × 18 in.

In my eighth grade elective class, we had previously done a unit on observational drawing and were now focusing on portraiture, more specifically self-portraits. Students began by doing various studies of different parts of their faces; eyes, nose, mouths. While students worked on their standard self-portraits, I was intrigued by the way they gazed at themselves in the mirror. I began to wonder, what have those eyes seen? From there I thought, how can I extend these observational and portrait projects into something more meaningful and relevant? I decided to have students focus solely on their eyes. I designed a unit incorporating observational drawing, printmaking and collage all centering on the theme of *The Eye*. I hoped that through this unit, I would better understand what social issues adolescents struggled with. Furthermore, I hoped through the unit to better understand and develop my role as facilitator of knowledge rather than dictator and to push my lessons towards action.

Students began by creating numerous eye studies; focusing on the individual shape and color of their eyes while simultaneously reflecting and journaling on various prompts. I asked students to reflect on the saying "eyes are the windows to the soul." We shared responses and then I had them go back and write about all the injustices they and their eyes have witnessed. I probed them to reflect on injustices witnessed and personally experienced. What things do you wish you could change in the world? What things are wrong with life as we live it? We went on to discuss the lack of public awareness and action around the various topics such as teen pregnancy, gang violence, domestic violence, and child abuse.

After intense conversations, we returned back to our eye drawings and now transferred them onto linoleum blocks. We discussed printmaking technique and positive and negative space. Students became so invested in their work and in each other's work that my role became minimal. Students printed their eye blocks to fill the entire paper. This alone was striking. Students then went on top of the black and layered the prints with additional colors of their choice. Following this, students blacked out an area—created a hole—a void—and used reappropriated images and/or text to discuss their chosen topic. Throughout the unit students were engaged and motivated. As a class we had extremely honest and intimate conversations. Opinions often differed, but the class created room for the tension. Students became genuinely interested in each other's topics and supportive of their peers. Again I took the backseat, only occasionally posing aesthetic questions or offering my opinion when asked. My students owned the classroom. Finally students contacted local organizations that advocated for their chosen topic; they interviewed personnel and in the end, decided to either donate their artwork to the organization or volunteer.

Colleagues were intrigued and disturbed. Some of the topics such as abortion and drug abuse had images that were hard for some to view. Ultimately some work was censored by the school administration because they deemed it not appropriate for the entire school. Even within all this, my students felt a profound

sense of accomplishment with this unit. They were proud of their work and of our evolution as a class.

When students examine and create art about a social issue they feel passionately about, their voices are valued and they come to see themselves in others. Adolescents are still raw and able to see. Their eyes are open. Our job is to teach them to see the world as it is and as it could be. Whatever comes next will be made and named by us.

Reference

- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.