Low-key Solidarity
Strategies for the Alliance

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An MFA Thesis Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Culminating from my ongoing research at the State University of New York at New Paltz, an investigation on how empathy can be invoked through participatory art emerged as my latest concentration. With simple instructions and a light-hearted atmosphere, my work invites the viewer to handle the objects and participate in the activities each installation facilitates. As part of the requirements for the Masters in Fine Arts, I was part of a group exhibition at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art on the SUNY New Paltz campus. The MFA exhibition included three sculptural installations creating a circuit of fabricated environments materialized as a reaction to a transparent, yet often over-looked reality where many relationships between human beings are lacking empathy. On a fundamental level, we need each other to survive and addressing the empathy deficit is critical. Positive connections are in need of nurturing and my work provides a friendly site to combat the social constructs that contribute to the dehumanized “other”. Intentions are amalgamated into shared time-based experiences and multiple iterations of each artwork are necessary to flush out what works and what doesn’t. Intersections between aesthetics, morality, empathy, and design provide complexity into questions of how does art interrupt a person’s beliefs or reinforce positive behavior.
ACCESSIBILITY

My work exists in both the public sphere and galleries. Most importantly, in the outdoors viewers can interact without having to consider attending an exclusive gallery space, museum, or lecture. Art-making, conceptual or otherwise, contributes to culture and I believe art should be as inclusive as possible. How far can I push accessibility and at what point does that render object-making obsolete? Absolute accessibility is not a feasible goal, but keeping the idea as part of an overall compass of deliberation can strengthen nuance of this ongoing body of work. While designing the tables and stools of *Enhanced Encounters: Slightly Vulnerable Spoken Word* and *Quiet Gifts from Strangers: Postcard Method* I referred to the American Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines as a parameter for the dimensions. Using the standards was a very simple way to ensure wider audience participation. I choose to build sculptural installations as I explore my role as an artist while finding ways to make positive and mutually beneficial offerings. Monopolizing the utilitarian features of interactive art installations accelerate non-linear approaches that foster empathetic behavior. Art that moves people to participate in practicing empathetic habits is a technique that can enrich the quality of our lives.
WHY MY RESEARCH SHIFTED

My studies had previously addressed matters concerning environmental issues under the umbrella of sustaining an overall healthy lifestyle. Using almost entirely recycled, repurposed, and surplus materials I built a wind turbine titled *Pinwheel* to create a whimsical perspective on alternative energy and to start a discourse regarding resource consumption. The piece worked as a wind generator, creating electricity to power lights, equipped with a repurposed treadmill motor and battery. The reference to an iconic toy attracts the curiosity of children, while simultaneously questioning our carefree nature, which has led to a lifestyle that undercuts the foundation of a sustainable environment. Through this sculpture that was exhibited in a public park, I wanted to draw attention to collaborative solutions that can contribute to a healthier environment, and galvanize us toward social change beginning at a young age.

Focusing on only one problem (extravagant energy consumption) was not enough to satisfy a broader definition of sustainable living that exists in the spaces connecting ourselves to people, community, society, and the environment. Showing empathy towards others is a building block for tackling global concerns. Giving space to actively try and understand a different experience than your own immediately changes the dynamics of a single relationship. Humans have a natural inclination to cooperate and if we habitually practice taking the time to imagine “walking in another’s shoes” our relationships with our closest communities along with a larger society could change for the better (Krznaric 19-20). Instead of using alternative energy as a means to converse about habits formed as children, the conversation moves to one about empathy, and how socially engaged art can change behavior directly. Socially engaged art is an immersive art form that works to activate people in order to demonstrate a certain societal condition. I agree with writer Nato Thompson that “the point is not to destroy the category of art,
but—straining against edges where art blurs into the everyday—to take a snapshot of cultural production at the beginning of the 21st century” (Thompson 26). By actively bringing these concepts to the forefront of our consciousness, our shared environment that bears the labors of living becomes a kinder one.

**CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Woven into my work, accessibility has remained a key thread that reminds me of my goals. Artists have a history of using the elements to make statements about how art is situated in relationship to the viewer. For example, the environmental sculpture, *Spiral Jetty*, by Robert Smithson, created in 1970 in Great Salt Lake, Utah exploits site specificity to explore his obsession with entropy. He lets the high tides of the salty lake deteriorate the local basalt rock formation. Smithson was a pioneer in redefining sculpture by bringing his work outside the white walls of the gallery to create what are called earthworks. In doing so, he made art that resisted commodification. My research now as I progress from the wind generator emphasizes the participatory experience that can’t be bought. As I learned of more contemporary practices of socially-engaged art, it led to clearer path for artistic communication. In 2010, artist Paul Ramirez Jonas created *The Key to the City*. It was a public art project located in Time Square free and available to all who wished to participate. Thousands of people bestowed thousands of keys to each other through a ceremonial exchange that included a map of where the keys will function. This work acknowledged citizens for any and all reasons they deserve to be. Keys to the city are normally reserved for mayors to bestow to dignitaries, but Jonas turned the exclusive tradition into one to celebrate the entire community and democracy. As art movements evolve, terms such as *social sculpture, socially engaged, and relational aesthetics* start to appear. Although, according to Nato Thompson’s definition of socially engaged art, it is not an art
movement; “unlike its avant-garde predecessors such as Russian Constructivism, Futurism, Situationism, Tropicalia, Happenings, Fluxus, and Dadaism...these [latest] cultural practices indicate a new social order—ways of life that emphasize participation, challenge power, and span disciplines ranging from urban planning and community work to theater and the visual arts” (Thompson 12). Still, some people question or refuse to accept the work like Paul Ramirez Jonas as art.

“Social sculpture” is an approach formulated in the 1960’s by artist Joseph Beuys in which the artwork is meant to change society. In his piece 7000 Oaks (1982), Beuys gives a prime example of how art, social, and environmental change can overlap. It started in Kassel, Germany when Beuys set out to find volunteers to plant 7,000 oak trees each accompanied with a monumental basalt rock. By bringing his artwork outside the gallery, Beuys was able to demonstrate how art impacts community by revamping the urban landscape of Kassel and bringing people together to create change. In the 1990’s, as an attempt to categorize contemporary art and express that it is not an immutable form, French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud described his views in his book Relational Aesthetics. He highlights that “artistic activity is a game, whose forms, patterns and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts...” (Bourriaud 11). As the growth of towns continue, he tells us that “art was intended to prepare and announce a future world: today it is modeling possible universes...[and] this evolution stems essentially from the birth of a world-wide urban culture, and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena” (Bourriaud 13).

Another example of an artistic practice that serves as a platform for pursuing goals that others may feel are unrelated to art is The Dorchester Project created by artist and urban planner Theaster Gates. It has been an ongoing collaborating with architects, students, and city officials...
since 2009. He transformed three abandoned buildings in Chicago’s South Side into informal gathering spaces by repurposing remnants of city landmarks. Just blocks from his childhood home, the project to preserve cultural history that stemmed from “…a mission to rescue architecture and objects has evolved into a larger mission to bring artistic and social change to the South Side, a historically undeserved neighborhood” (Thompson, 160).

PERSONAL CONTEXT

As I formulate a pedagogical philosophy, I find both technical skills and an open conceptual playing field important. I am inexorably inspired by artists that bring people into formation: extinguishing any necessity for formal qualities. Rosalind Krauss’ 1979 article Sculpture in the Expanded Field explains how artistic endeavors have crossed boundaries and stepped into the “expanded field.” Artists need not to render a still life or carve humans out of stone to be taken seriously. Not all artists working under these terms abandon visual components, but there it is value in “non-art specialty” to allow students to rely on their own resources, leaving room for innovation (Helguera 86). Exposing new students to artists that test opinions of what art can be broadens their ambitions and empowers them to explore extraordinary ideas using Joseph Beuys’ argument that “Everyone is an Artist”. In my experience teaching an introduction to studio art class at SUNY New Paltz has allowed me to experience firsthand the value in understanding that art can be transdisciplinary, falling between two disciplines where opportunities to challenge the definition of art have yet to be explored. Artists that combine activism and art embrace the effectiveness of people en masse. This year in pop-culture, when Beyoncé delivered the beguiling line “…ladies, now let’s get in formation…” she opened herself to an image representing a force unforgiving to injustice. Strategies vary across many disciplines on how to address inadequate social adaptations, and as a self-proclaimed artist I find
participatory art accompanied with physically enticing materiality to be an exciting way to move forward.

**IMPLEMENTATION**

For my Masters in Fine Arts thesis exhibition at the Samuel Dorsky Museum at SUNY New Paltz I’ve created a circuit of participatory sculptures. Each interactive installation embodies an activity that attributes to building empathetic relationships in order to combat social constructs that contribute to the dehumanized “other”. There are opportunities to imagine, speak, or write in order to interact with others in a mutually beneficial way. My collaborative project with artist Ori Alon, *Hidden Fortune Wheel: an Imaginative Leap into Someone Else’s Shoes*, gives people the space to play pretend. A mobile platform housing an interactive wheel resembling the one from the television show Wheel of Fortune sits upright with categories not representing dollars to win, but rather the titles given to mainly marginalized groups of people. The twelve categories reflect particular identities, especially those that face heightened discrimination now that our current political climate has raised questions on how to treat other people with respect. After spinning the wheel until they land on an identity other than their own, the viewer is asked to notice their reaction. And then for the next ten minutes to try and imagine what it would be like to take on the perspective of someone else while continuing to do what they were planning to. Participants have to pull from their own previous experiences in order to play the game so the option to keep their thoughts and reactions to themselves removes potential for judgment. From the onset of approaching the artwork, playfulness interlaces with serious self-reflection. An option to record their findings is provided using a public journal and a social media hash tag (#HiddenFortuneWheel).
Hidden Fortune Wheel: an Imaginative Leap into Someone Else’s Shoes, wood, steel, journal, pen
While *Hidden Fortune Wheel: an Imaginative Leap into Someone Else’s Shoes* takes contestants on an imaginary journey, *Quiet Gifts from Strangers: Postcard Method* attracts
willing partakers into a cycle of giving. The new contributors are asked to consider the well-being of a stranger by sending a message they would like to receive themselves if they were in the position of randomly obtaining the writings of a mysterious someone. The postcard is a gift, and as small of a gesture it may be, the results I’ve seen thus far prove that people are open to starting dialogue given an opportunity easy to digest. The installation contains the fixings to create your own postcard from repurposed cardstock. If you choose to insert your completed postcard into the provided box, I will then collect and mail them. Sending thoughtful messages enables the viewer to be part of a larger system. Physically, the body is enveloped sitting between two rectangular forms as if they opened up like a wardrobe trunk. Participants give their time for others, and in return I move the process onward to the next messenger.

The structure is built from steel, alluding to the shape of a U.S. Postal Service mailbox. Among the painted postal blue frame, wooden shelves lined with a frosted steel finish display the components and give space to lay out any of the phone books and stamps. There is a pile of blank repurposed cardstock precut to a standard postcard proportion for the taking. The laser engraved instructions propped up on the top shelf prompts people to then use the linoleum carved block as a stamp to create the lines to format the postcard. The stamp that reads #PhoneBookFind will hopefully offer feedback on social media as time progresses and may relieve any anxiety to the message recipients as to why they are receiving a note to their home. Not everyone realizes they are listed in the phone book. Fifty four inches in height with a stool eighteen inches high, the station feels semi-private. The frame is open, but the suggestion of walls and an environment akin to a home office forms an impression that it is okay to take your time.
Small Gifts from Strangers: Postcard Method, steel, wood, paper, linoleum, stamps, pen, ink, phone books
Small Gifts from Strangers: Postcard Method, steel, wood, paper, linoleum, stamps, pen, ink, phone books

To complete the circuit of interactive sculptures, the piece Enhanced Encounters: Slightly Vulnerable Spoken Word provides tools to start an oral conversation. The work consists of a table, two chairs, and prompts to invite strangers to sit with one another. The table is fabricated out of steel and wood. The countertop resembles a peanutesque or amoeba-like shape, and is painted orange. The bright color and unassuming form acts like a beacon within a crowd or from a distance, invoking curious potential participants. The setting is friendly. The dimensions fall within ADA regulations, the chairs aren’t fixed, and there are sample questions available to start talking. The questions are engraved on small laser cut plywood squares and go beyond typical small talk. The sculpture draws in viewers and then eases them into meaningful conversation which, according to conversation expert Theodore Zeldin, offers an exchange of trust, wisdom, and courage. Empathy spreads through shared experiences. Zeldin believes that “…if you can
bring two people together from different backgrounds and encourage them to have one-on-one conversation in which they take off their masks, share parts of their lives, and look through each other’s eyes, then you have created a small moment of equality and mutual understanding. And by multiplying these kinds of conversations, you can produce a microcosmic yet potent form of social change” (Krznaric 105).
MIRRORING

In his famed book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau asked “Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” (Thoreau 137). What exactly would happen if we *did* experience another person’s perspective? No such miracle can be possible, but if it means our lives and the lives of others can be improved, it’s worth it to try. Although we may never fully understand someone else’s perspective, putting forth the well-aligned effort to unveil the common humanity between us can only strengthen the bonds it takes for survival. Technological advances have contributed to scientific research concerning our species’ natural ability to empathize. Adrienne Wood, a graduate student of Psychology at the University of Wisconsin wrote that “…when people [intentionally] simulate a perceived facial
expression, they partially activate the corresponding emotional state in themselves, which provides a basis for inferring the underlying emotion of the expresser” (Wood, 1). Empathy can also spread to animals and the environment, which are all part of a shared system that keeps us alive. The latest research developed around the empathetic brain points to neurological activity that allows people and animals to share emotions even though only one had the causal experience. Writer and neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni investigates how these mirror neurons help us understand facial expressions and actually feel pain just by looking at another person’s suffering. He believes that “these moments…are the foundation of empathy and possibly of morality, a morality that is deeply rooted in our biology” (Iacoboni 5). Writer Jonah Lehrer acknowledges that science has its limits. Creative imagination leads to rigorous experiments, and “…the one reality science cannot reduce is the only reality we will ever know. This is why we need art. By expressing our actual experience, the artist reminds us that our science is incomplete, that no map of matter will ever explain the immateriality of our consciousness” (Lehrer xii).

AESTHETICS

How can I tempt people to interact with the art and with each other? Design is an integral part in creating welcoming atmosphere and the last thing I want to do is discourage people from participating. Focus on carefully constructed materials and thoughtful craftsmanship attributes to a phenomenon that in my experience sustains my interest in looking at an object. A highly debated subject, the power of aesthetics, visual or otherwise, affects people physiologically (Dissanayake 128-9, 141). I find it irrefutable that when something is aesthetically pleasing, I want to look for longer. Experiences that request extra time are more likely to imprint my memory, which allows for later contemplation. Utilizing the evocative and time-based nature of
sculpture and installation art I can accentuate the importance of reflecting the politically charged topics in my work. Inspired by the craftsmanship of sculptor Martin Puryear, the deliberate expression of materials is a means for projecting the evidence of the human touch, illuminating a sense of time and narrative.

My sculptures are also utilitarian, blurring the line between art and furniture. I would not refute that Enhanced Encounters: Slightly Vulnerable Spoken Word is certainly a table, but I would argue that it lies in the realm of installation art under the broader term of sculpture. Installation art is a natural extension of phenomenology and is equipped to accept everyday living materials so that viewer engagement takes priority (Hobbs 21). Viewers are recruited into the new environments “…but their roles depend on the dynamics resulting from a synthesis formed between themselves…[and the artwork]” (Hobbs 23).
HOW

Taking strides is not effortless. How do we make the leap to consciously consider someone other than ourselves we may otherwise never have thought about? Understanding the value in empathy is first and foremost. One of the most visceral ways to grasp it is to imagine the world without it. We probably wouldn’t feed the children or care about what anyone else needs. To consider cultivating our empathy in today’s society is like swimming upstream. For decades, psychoanalysis in western culture coined introspection as the dominant and most efficient path to happiness (Krznaric xx). Along with looking within it is possible to also come to know who you are by learning about the lives and cultures of other people. Can this be fun? Yes! Yet, navigating a space and mustering the courage to talk to a stranger is a lot to ask. Participatory art provides an arena of camaraderie where those wishing to participate can plant their feet, take root, and grow. Noticing others is a necessity in order to start to begin to feel empathy. According to Roman Krznaric author of Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It, you can challenge stereotypes by expressing a curiosity about others. Where is the balance between the too personal and not personal enough? There is a give and take and if we can radically listen to other people, gain insight to their world view, dreams, ideas, and create a shared experience without regard to how small, we could potentially give voice to the voiceless and create real social change. Ironically it is easier for children to talk to strangers; through art we can rekindle that kind of curiosity. We don’t need to over share our emotions to exchange trust, but according to emotions researcher Brene Brown the goal is to feel a “vulnerability hangover” where the next day you wonder why you shared your story (Krznaric 116). Opening up yourself and putting your body in new situations invites experiential learning.
Among the vast amounts of social and political dismay, some art is strategically placed to confront human behavior and spread awareness. Through designing and building structures to facilitate interaction among people, my artwork provides an opportunity for participation and prompts thoughtful behavior in the course of instructional activities. Technically the term participation can be interpreted as merely as looking at the objects, but the artworks here call for a direct material interaction. Rather than run parallel to real life experiences, as icons and symbolism do, I impose an unfolding narrative akin to a developing disclosure toward humanization. An interdisciplinary artistic practice paired with the pursuit of a society where appreciation of other beings spans the globe, has the capacity to sustain an exploration of boundless knowledge. Openness to learning from others forms new territory. And like the inquisitive two-dimensional square in the 1884 novel Flatland, he shares his story:

“I despair not that, even here, in this region of Three Dimensions, your Lordship’s art may make the Fourth Dimension visible to me; just as in the Land of Two Dimensions my Teacher’s skill would fain have opened the eyes of his blind servant to the invisible presence of a Third Dimension, thought I saw it not” (Abbott 142).


