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Fertile Ground: Reflections on Collaborative Student-Faculty Research in the Arts

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This project grew out of mutual interests. In January of 2008, I briefly introduced myself to the students in my Honors 112 seminar, describing my most recent research on a women's art collective that painted together in Houston, Texas, during the 1970s. That afternoon, I received an e-mail from Honors 112 student Aya Mares that was charged with enthusiasm for art as "fertile ground for change."

Mimi had told our class that she was researching the Houston art collective, the Garden Artists, because her mother had been a member. She hoped to learn more about the workings of an art collective and art's potential healing for a group of women, some of whom suffered from poor health or depression. I, too, am quite curious about the societal healing power of art, so I emailed Mimi asking her for any art therapy resources she might have come across in her research. This is where our project began.

I replied to Aya that perhaps we could combine our respective research questions—hers being particularly related to art activism, mine to art collectives, and both of us sharing a desire to study therapeutic aspects of art. We decided to submit a proposal to present on our collaborative research (which had yet to take place) at the 2008 NCHC Conference in October. Our proposal was accepted, so we gradually mapped out a research plan in which we would conduct oral histories over the summer with a variety of Maine artists, several of whom were members of art collectives.

Our project was primarily interview-based. Mimi and I met with former members of the women's art collective, the 8"x 10"s, Gail Page and Lydia Cassat; former member of the 10"x 10"s and current art activist Robert Shetterly; art therapist Fran Clukey; art teacher and humble art activist Margaret Baldwin; the environmental art activist group the Beehive Collective; and a fiery woman artist and wife of a former University of Maine Honors College Director, Arline Thomson.

Our NCHC conference proposal claimed that we would present not only our research findings but also the experience of doing a collaborative student-

faculty project, a topic that we found to be equally fertile ground. Conducting shared research with a student expanded my notion of myself as an instructor as I suggested scholarly ways to pursue common questions while remaining open to the many lessons Aya would teach. I guided us through fundamental research steps: drafting a conference presentation proposal; submitting a description of our research to the University of Maine Human Subjects Review Board; mastering Marantz digital recorders borrowed from our library's Media Resource Center; drafting consent forms; zipping around in university cars; arranging meetings with interviewees; and arriving together on subjects' doorsteps with shared scholarly anxiety and anticipation.

I regret having failed to collaborate wholly at times, mostly when schedules were tight. I could dash off an email draft of a consent form for Aya's review faster than we could coordinate a meeting to work on it. We did, however, manage authentic writing collaboration on several pieces, and I felt genuinely successful as a faculty collaborator during the rich and rewarding experience of conducting oral histories, which we did in a balanced and equitable way.

What a great experience it has been. Mimi and I have different backgrounds and experiences. This project propelled our individual research, and many interviews proved particularly meaningful for us. I am a third-year student at the University of Maine and began my time here as an art history major. As students do, I periodically questioned my choice of majors and wanted to explore other possibilities in the field of art and beyond. One of my thoughts had been the field of art therapy until our interview with art therapist Fran Clukey. Although Fran made clear how her work helps people, especially children in the community, I realized that her field might not be the path for me. Fran described an enormous wall of paperwork separating her from people who need help the most, like returning Iraqi war veterans whose limited insurance precluded their receiving treatment. I crave direct action.

Subsequent research in art activism excited me in a way that art therapy had not. The first art activist Mimi and I spoke with was Robert Shetterly, a painter who has mastered the art of effectively communicating with his audience through his bold exhibit "Americans Who Tell The Truth." The subjects for his 131 portraits range from small restaurant owners to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to the Gold Star mothers who have lost a child in combat. Through his paintings, Rob prompts others to recognize the truth he sees in the remarkable Americans whom he portrays. He hopes to inspire citizenship, to encourage his audience to engage actively in bringing about authentic, radical change.

While speaking with Robert Shetterly about his art and its educational value, he mentioned a friend and fellow artist, Lily Yeh, and the positive role her art has played in the world. Yeh has worked for many years with inner-city communities and in war-torn countries creating art parks with murals, sculptures, and mosaics. Rob described how Lily and her organization, the Barefoot Artists, healed people in despair through the community art projects. In turn, suffering groups have begun to see themselves as people still alive. I recognized

Yeh as a direct-action art therapist, and I was able to imagine becoming a bare-foot artist one day.

My thoughts on Art Therapy were transformed yet again when we spoke with artist Gail Page. Gail described murals that she had painted in an orphanage in Saigon and explained that an infusion of color altered the whole aura of the place. She also described painting images of "spinning charkas" in vibrant colors, a process which she claimed preserved her energy and sustained her spirit through her own bout with breast cancer. In speaking with Gail, I understood that art therapy can be put into practice in various ways that might be personal and intimate for the practitioner. Above all, I was convinced that art indeed has a way of healing.

I further benefited from speaking with the environmental art activist group, the Beehive Collective, based in Machias, Maine. Through research, collaboration, and education, the Beehive Collective has created enormous pen-and-ink murals depicting militarization, colonization, and privatization incurred by imperial governments and transnational corporations, highlighting the damaging consequences for the earth and its inhabitants. Like Shetterly, the Beehive Collective is thorough in its research and clear in its imagery, telling stories through verbal and visual language.

The Bees are an exceptional example of an art collective. Begun as a women's mosaic group in 2000, the collective has expanded nationally and internationally into a complex social system that is wholly cooperative, eschewing individualism and art ego through shared projects and cohabitation. No art, according to the Bees, is made outside of community. They are anti-copyright, describing themselves simply as transmitters who do not own their ideas—an organism not an organization.

Visiting the house in which members of the Beehive Collective communally live was a telling experience. When we finally found the Bees' dwelling place, Mimi and I knocked on a side door that read, "Warning Bees." Inside the house, we found grungy young adults jointly preparing a polenta and beans breakfast, which they generously shared with us. Mason jars full of an odd leafy mixture looked less appealing, but we joined a small group at the kitchen table, and they explained their mission, their distribution of jobs, their collaborative mural work, and their extraordinary trips to Cuba and Panama. The environment was productive, exciting, and attractive in its cooperativeness.

As Mimi and I sat on the Collective's rickety kitchen chairs, I looked around the room, taking in the chore charts and the various facial expressions that greeted us or that didn't greet us at all. I listened to whispered conversations in the background, noting an undeniable tension that I recognized as something that grows out of the pressure and strain of being overworked as well as living with one's co-workers and friends all at once. I had considered joining a collective after I complete my undergraduate degree at the University of Maine. Visiting the Beehive helped re-shape images I had in my mind of collective living. I now have sturdier and more realistic ground upon which to make decisions related to future communal life and work.

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I encourage students to research what they think they want to do before they make a commitment. An intensive look into art therapy or an art activist collective did not shatter my idealistic views of using art as my medium in the caretaking of the world. This research project strengthened and balanced my perspective. I have been encouraged and empowered through exploring my options, and the Honors College and Mimi have supported me in this effort.

Many of our questions regarding art activism, art therapy, and art collectives were answered through our research, yet we also discovered new and important lines of inquiry. We became wholly convinced that we must analyze the studio spaces in which art is produced in order to understand an artist and fully appreciate his or her intent. We gradually considered more deeply issues surrounding gender and art, having conducted a study primarily of women artists. Finally, we developed a more textured understanding of the unique potency and authenticity of original art as it offers an especially profound expression of individual experience and an important means toward activism and healing.

This study was not for a class, and it was not for a job; it was simply an experimental research project from which I have gained interviewing skills and knowledge of the paths I may want to pursue during my time at the University of Maine and beyond graduation.

Having explored rich fertile ground together, Aya and I will now cull from our work what we need for our respective studies in the arts. I also take away from this experience a newfound enthusiasm for collaborative student-faculty research, recognizing the endless mutual benefits of engaging my honors students as colleagues with whom I might share scholarly questions and conduct future, common research.

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