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EDUCATION, ACTIVISM, PERFORMANCE ART

Sharing Metaphors for Cultural Work

BY DAHN HIUNI



I

The last third of the twentieth century saw paradigmatic cultural change. The emancipation movements of the era, whose goals were to expose inequities and re-negotiate power, have presented us not only with new political realities in the West, but have also had far-reaching impact on the operations of social institutions such as education and art. The critiques of the political and social status quo of the 1960s and 70s have their parallels in critical pedagogy in the realm of education, and in the critical practices of identity politics associated with much postmodern art. The grassroots, radical activism of the street had managed to reinvigorate pedagogical strategies in the classroom, as it did artistic strategies in the studio. Activism, education and art all became sites of political consciousness, where resistance engendered transgression. (See Figure 1.)

A public pedagogy of and for the

ing, these activists were united in a large-scale project to educate or *re*-educate the public. Inspired by the emancipatory moment, certain educators abandoned their traditional roles as transmitters of knowledge and value and instead redefined their primary objective as the creation of a responsible, critically engaged citizenry who may fulfill the ideals of a democratic society. These critical pedagogues envisioned, and then realized, an activism from within the system. Concurrently, in the art world, performance had matured as a viable form, rising to the forefront of artistic practice by the 1970s. In timely fashion and not coincidentally, performance art became the preferred vehicle for artists who felt marginalized by the same injustices that were being protested on the street, injustices based on race, gender, sexuality and so forth. By the 1980s, the tradition of radical political activism and the impulse for public pedagogy had notably intersected and taken residence in the world

of performance art. The vigorous interdisciplinarity of the work of Suzanne Lacy, Gran Fury, Tim Miller and Mierle Ukeles, was a testament to the affinities and the intersections of the pedagogical, the activist and the performative.

I belong to that group. When I look at the work that I have accomplished so far in my life, I identify three equally impassioned commitments: as an educator, as an activist, and as an artist. Today I realize how much these activities are mutually invested one in the other—how each has woven itself into the consciousness of the other. Sparked by personal

experience and contextualized in historical account, I would like to argue that the overlaps between education, activism and performance art, are, at the very least, compelling. Following is a photographic juxtaposition meant to visualize this correlation. (See Figure 2.)

In triptych form, I offer an image of a classroom in which I am teaching, a street in which I am demonstrating, and a public space in which I am performing.

What is the relationship between education and activism? If one exists, how does it intersect with art—performance art in particular? How did activism, education and performance art inform the political struggles of the last third of the twentieth century, and how were each of these areas in turn affected by those struggles? From this historical moment of resistance—wherein participating subjects in all three realms shared transformative objectives and not dissimilar means of intervention—can we forge metaphorical links between the work of the activist, the teacher and the artist so as to broaden the jurisdiction and extend the responsibilities of all three? That is, would it be worthwhile to view education as a *form* of activism, and activism as essentially education? Would it be worthwhile to speak of the artist as an activist and as a teacher? What benefits would we reap were we thoughtfully to implicate one in the work of the other?

Beyond metaphoric alliances, would it be worthwhile to suggest that there is indeed a real partnership that exists between, but is not limited to, these three groups and that it is called *cultural work*? What would constitute such work and who would qualify as a cul-

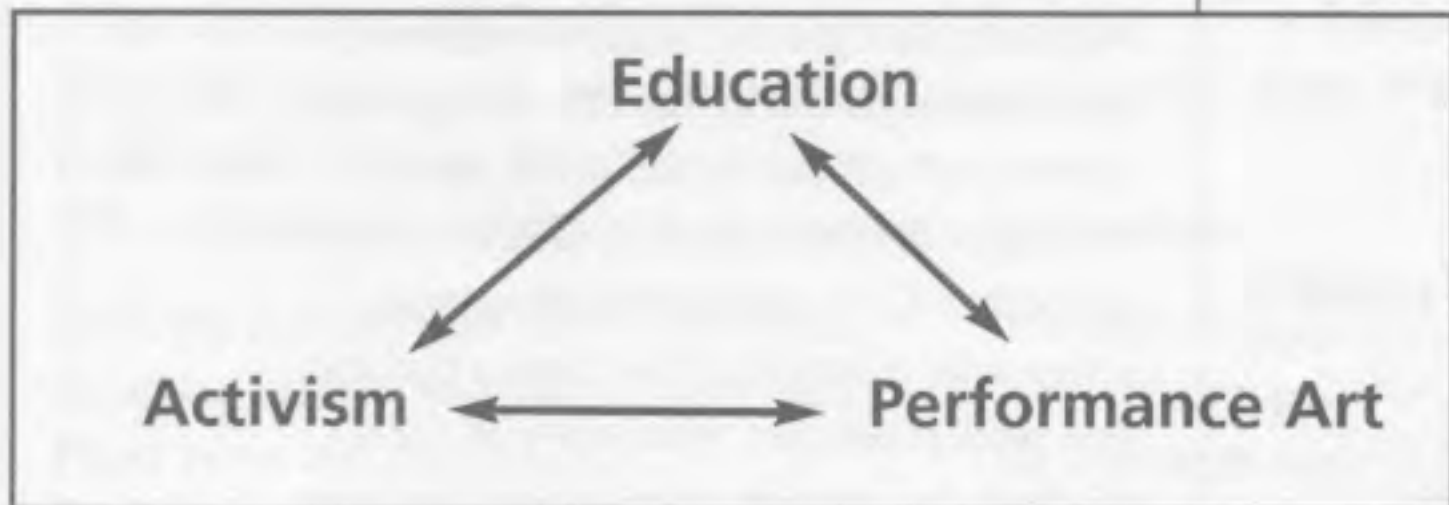


Figure 1

citizenry was very much underway. The demonstrations of the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement, the student movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, and later the AIDS crisis, were all occasions when activism and education overlapped. Varied demands notwithstand-



Figure 2

tural worker? For example, could teachers, activists and performance artists all be intervening in and working on behalf of culture, simply with varying degrees of urgency? Are they utilizing different tactics—ranging from the institutional to the radical—but, in the end, all after the same thing? Furthermore, why is it that the commonalities of these three areas become conspicuously apparent at times of crisis, when all three groups spill into the street and become indistinguishable? Can we sustain a model of collaboration between various cultural workers for times other than in those which we are in crisis?

II

The ground swell of political activism circa 1960-1990 accounts for an unprecedented chapter of human history in which liberation from oppression and injustice was collectively sought by many different groups in society. By *activism* I refer to a demonstrative, urgent and often transgressive initiative or intervention, taken by individuals or groups who feel oppressed or wronged, and who have in mind certain reparative goals. The *act* in activism is often meant to empower the *actors* and those who are witness to their actions and gestures. The activist work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, particularly his germinal 1970 work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, links the nature of oppression (the reason for activism) with *the purpose of education*. Through his work with illiterate (voiceless) workers, Freire came to see the goal of education as *humanization through critical co-investigation*, a process wherein individuals achieve self-empowerment and self-dignity by cultivating a capacity for critical, reflexive dialogue (Freire, 1970). Freire's commitments eloquent-

ly illuminate, as they demonstrate in action, empowerment in the public realm: the inextricable, ameliorative link between education and activism.

Critical pedagogy is an outgrowth of both the political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, and Freirian philosophy. These *educators of resistance* hold that, for the maintenance of a true democracy, it is incumbent upon them to enable their students to expose power relations and bias in the formation and dissemination of knowledge, thereby contesting dominant forms of cultural production across a spectrum of sites—including the classroom (Giroux, 1992). By utilizing the school as a site of resistance, critical pedagogy believes students may evolve into *critical citizens* with an indelible sense of their own agency. The emancipatory goals of critical pedagogy, seeking to awaken the moral, political and civic responsibilities of youth represent an activism of the first order. The belief that the political and the pedagogical are one leaves no choice but for educators to consider themselves front-liners—activists in the name of democracy, liberty and social justice.

Like the rallying call of the activist and the critical educator, the performance artist uses his or her own physical presence as a ground onto which the audience may project their desires for liberation and uprising. The notion of using one's body as the metaphorical battleground on which to publicly wage struggles of difference and power now belongs as much to the continuum of art history as they do to activism and to the work of radical educators. A performance artist such as Janine Antoni who deals in the claiming of cultural presence, voice and agency, bares and wrings her body as contested terrain, a site of political struggle—where the

body has a currency of honesty and a means of raising the stakes. The urgency of her gestures in a performance such as "In Loving Care," in which she mops the gallery floor with her hair, resembles the objectives of the activist: waving, flailing, falling down—demonstrating. The environmentally-minded performances of Mierle Ukeles, particularly her ongoing commitment in the late 70s to acknowledge New York City sanitation workers by daily shaking every last employee's hand, as well as Suzanne Lacy's *Inter*-performances, sweeping symbolic rallies of entire communities around a social issue, pose my definitional dilemma: are they performances, demonstrations or lessons? The collapse that occurs with works such as these renders questions of the sort irrelevant, for it plainly demonstrates the undeniable, eminently useful alliances between the work of people who demonstrate, people who perform, and people who teach.

Perhaps these overlaps are even more succinct in the street actions of Gran Fury, the creative arm of ACT-UP most active in the late 1980s and early 1990s at the height of the American AIDS crisis. In those years, the terror and unimaginable loss experienced primarily by the gay community was only surpassed by the frightening specter of public indifference. Because *taking action* often meant the difference between life and death, the demonstrations and public education campaigns became ritualized spectacles of sobering performativity. At that moment more than ever, education, activism, and performance art braided, like a tight helix, into a powerful new model of urgent cultural work. *Educating* the public about the HIV virus and safer sex practices, while *demonstrating* against the homophobia and apathy of Reagan-



Bush policies and the greed of pharmaceutical companies, resulted in poignant and, in retrospect, *key performative acts* whose role in steering the political and epidemiological course of the disease may not be underestimated. Like in war, the AIDS crisis was an opportunity to watch hierarchies, boundaries, assigned roles and often egos, disappear before one's very eyes as the various contingencies and constituencies united in common cause: public health workers, community volunteers, seasoned activists, actors, artists, writers, professors. It was not only that these individuals realized their ends to be similar, but that these same individuals understood and then took advantage of the striking similarities of their *means*.

III

From this historic period of social and political agitation, culminating in the AIDS crisis, it may be inferred that a noted overlap between the activism, the pedagogical practices and the performance art activity of the decades 1960-1990 was in fact in operation. However, regardless of its status as historical fact, or mere retrospective interpretation on my part, I would like to suggest that the *legacy* of the period makes a convincing argument for exploring the correlations between education, activism and performance art as they might exist *outside* of periods of crisis. In other words, I propose a general, *generalized* model of correlation between the three areas based on a perception of the provocative potential such a permanent alliance may hold—metaphoric but perhaps also literal.

Education, activism and performance art intersect in a fundamental way as gestures of intervention in culture. Their potency, however, may undergo a manifold increase if each of the areas extracts maximum metaphorical potential from comparing its ends and its means to those of the other two areas. (See Figure 3.) For example, how would education be enriched if it saw itself as a form of activism, a site of consciousness-raising—anarchic protests and all? Is the teacher the activist or are the students activists as well? And how can the operations of teaching be

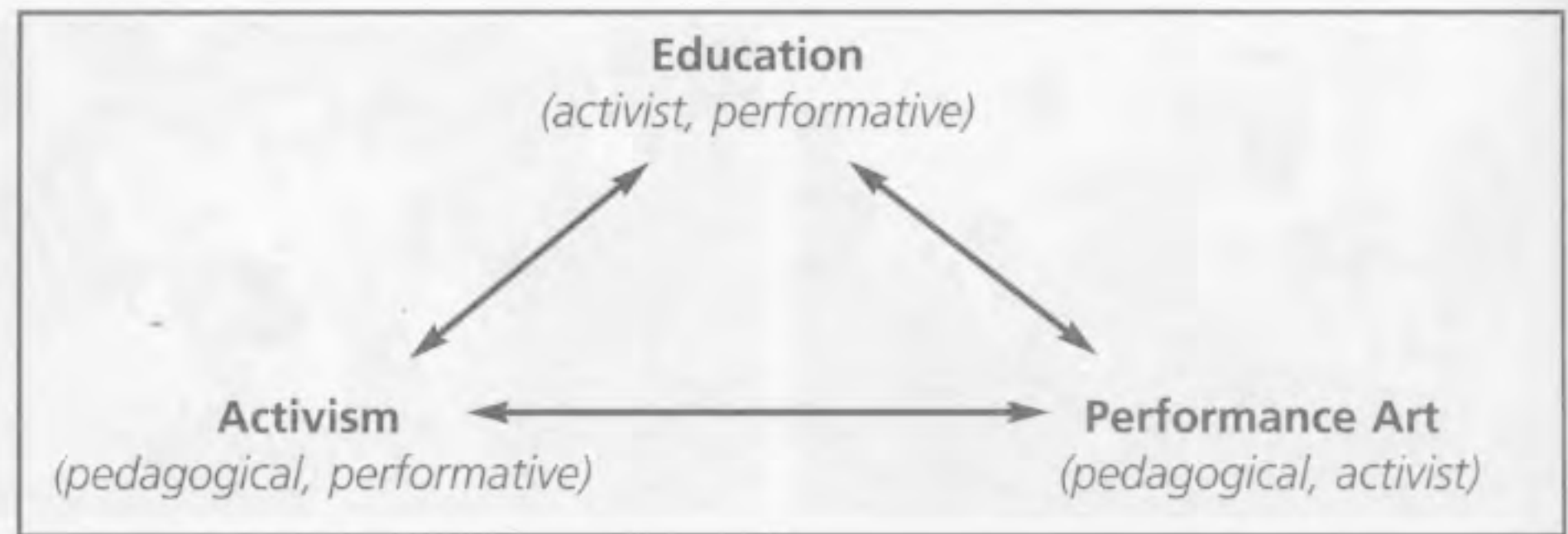


Figure 3

enlivened once the centrality of performativity to the discipline of teaching is acknowledged? Likewise, what responsibilities will activism take on if it understood itself primarily in terms of (public) education, and how can it increase the efficacy and poignancy of the act of protest by looking to performance art, as did members of Gran Fury? And finally, what responsibility does performance art have to its inherent pedagogical potential and how would it evolve if it were *further* to exploit the activist dimension of its enterprise? (See figure 3.) What is the role of decorum and restraint, transgression and subversion, and civil disobedience and lawlessness—in art, activism and education alike? By examining such overlapping concepts, each respective area may serve for the other as a thought-provoking sounding board, perhaps even a strategically, providing new insights and possibly new interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies. Each area would thus be challenged to broaden its mandate and its responsibilities when seeing itself in the new light of *collaborator*.

While I believe each of the three cultural practices I cite naturally engenders cross-disciplinary thinking, they are also all equally susceptible to various degrees of insularity. Activism, education and art can all be as myopic as any practice which, in attending excessively to its own definitional status, loses sight of the greater goals of a democratic society—ensuring that all its citizens have an opportunity to reap the rewards of their lived sense of agency. But, if the three begin to bear upon the consciousness of the other, and the metaphors that each can supply the other are vigorously extracted and imaginatively explored, bonds may strengthen, communities may widen, and transformative potential may be reinvigorated through

a strong *shared* sense of imagined agency.

Drawing such parallels between education, activism and performance art, prompts reflections on structural affinities such as we mentioned. These should be investigated, as they are both compelling and empirical. One could observe the individual/group dynamic at the heart of all three: the teacher/students, protester/public, performer/audience equation, and what role the charismatic individual plays in the success of all three. Other studies may focus on the time-based aspects of the activities, examining how each area understands the *unfolding* nature and significance of its event. And still others might investigate the reliance on language and the role it plays in the construction of meaning by different participants. However, the formal similarities are, for the moment, superseded by the philosophical threads that I believe may, in the end, unite these projects.

The most basic dimension at which the pedagogical, the activist and the performative intersect may be ethical. Education, activism and performance art all represent pervasive cultural practices of intervention in the public realm which may be guided primarily by *moral* imperatives: to expose injustice, alleviate oppression and cultivate agency. Therefore, despite the range of actions produced, all three may be seen as stemming from underlying impulses connected to the presence of conscience. If education, activism, and art are all forms of engagement in the world, they necessarily possess a moral dimension, for it is impossible to act or want to act without having some notion of what is good or might be good and what is bad or might be bad, in a society. Thus, I propose that the inter-relatedness of the activities may be under-

stood in the sense that educators, activists and performance artists are all individuals who share a deep moral conviction to intervene constructively in life, and in the lives of others, so as to *better it*. Said differently, their commonalities lie in their lack of ambivalence to the social good, and therefore result in the impulse *to act in the public realm*.

This proposed ethical link may define the umbrella concept of cultural work as a whole. While various forms and codes of cultural work exist, it is perhaps their moral mission which unites them: to inspire in all the citizens of that culture a vision of empowerment and dignified selfhood. Thus, one definition of cultural work may characterize it as moral interventions (that is, interventions which have distinguished between oppression and liberation, justice and injustice, good and bad) which

are meant to cultivate agency in the individuals who comprise that culture.

My goals as an educator, as an activist, and as an artist are the same: to dignify humanity by exposing oppression, eliminating injustice, and unencumbering agency. It is this lived and deeply felt notion of the viability of a shared mission that represents the basis for my proposing an integrated, interdisciplinary model of transformative cultural work, in and out of crisis.

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