

The Highlights - What's Your Context?

JONATHAN BOGARIN: One question I think would be extremely helpful for art teachers to ask students, and for artists to ask themselves, is: "What social context is this work of art being designed for?"

Jonathan Bogarín and "Life Lines" Community Arts Project, Visible Memories: the story of lives (in painting), 2007, video, 4 minutes.

ELAN BOGARIN: Why does that matter?

JB: Well, if we ask this question it means that we are not taking the role an artist plays in society for granted, and we're not assuming that all art needs to be designed for a traditional art context. It's a simple question, but asking it more often can open up possibilities of how art can function in the world, what we can consider art, and what histories and disciplines we can look to for inspiration.

EB: Who are some artists that you feel have expanded the definition of art, and the role that an artist can play in society?



Jonathan Bogarín, Sarah Morrison, and students from "Life Lines" Community Arts Project in front of a work from *Visible Memories: the story of lives (in painting)*, 2007, painted banners installed along ½ mile of 4th Avenue, Brooklyn, NY.

JB: There are a lot of artists who have created work that really questions the role of an artist. Three that come to mind are Fred Wilson, Robert Blackburn, and Samuel Mockbee. Each proposes a different set of possibilities.

Wilson challenges traditional attitudes about art by going into museums and changing around the display of museum pieces, creating surprising juxtapositions. His interventions show that the interpretation of an object or artwork is totally connected to its context. By showing that an object's meaning can change depending on its context, he shows us that no single idea of culture or concept of history is absolute.

Bob Blackburn, who started up the Printmaking Workshop in New York, was someone I was lucky enough to work with. In the late 1940s he began a print shop in which artists from all over could have access to printmaking equipment and a supportive environment. His work was in printmaking - a traditional art medium, but his innovation was that he realized that not everyone had access to a print shop. By creating a social context where others had the resources to express their own artistic vision, his work as an artist expanded beyond a traditional definition. The founding of the shop itself was an act of creativity.

Mockbee is interesting because the Rural Studio that he founded combines the practices of architecture, education, and community activism. He worked closely with residents of poor, rural communities in Alabama to identify what kinds of buildings were needed. Then, rather than just build some buildings, he brought in college architecture students to design the buildings, and found recycled materials to build them from. This way, he was able to contribute something to the local residents and to the students while producing interesting architecture at the same time.

EB: Each of the artists you mentioned has questioned conventional wisdom about what constitutes an art practice. Why are you interested in these questions? What about your background or your history led you to your current viewpoint?



Jonathan Bogarín and Elan Bogarín, *Invisible Murals*, 2006-2009, still from a feature-length documentary film.

JB: From the time I was very young, I had always made art based on the question "What can art communicate?" without ever really asking the question "What is art?" I was thinking about the poetry of art and how to give artworks interesting forms, but I never questioned art's purpose or social function. Luckily, I had a lot of experiences, from high school all the way to grad school, that made me realize the importance of questioning how I thought art could operate in the world. The institutions that were shaping my values about art were very homogenous and, in a lot of ways, based on exclusivity in terms of not acknowledging multiple points of view.

EB: When and why did you realize that?

JB: It began in high school. I don't even know if it occurred to me in terms of art at first; it occurred to me in terms of education. I realized that different students were being educated in different ways. Teachers would have different expectations of students who were white or Asian than they would for students who were black or Latino. There was a totally different set of expectations. One time in seventh grade a classmate of mine was paying me back some money I had lent him to see a movie, and immediately a teacher walked over and asked me "Oh, are you selling drugs?" At the moment it washed right off my back, but afterwards I thought, "What the fuck was she thinking?" You always knew whom teachers

would look to first as potential criminals, or as the people who were likely to fail. I still see a lot of the same attitudes directed at students I work with today, and it's really dismaying.

EB: But what does that have to do with art?



Jonathan Bogarín and "Life Lines" Community Arts Project, *Visible Memories: the story of lives (in painting)*, 2007, view of student-led tour.

JB: It's that art and education are totally connected. We need to analyze the ways we're taught and the attitudes behind our education, and then be responsive in the ways that we teach and the ways we approach our art practices. The teachers who were making assumptions about minority students in school generally meant no harm. They were simply part of a larger culture that held certain assumptions, and that felt no need to analyze itself because it was the dominant culture. The same thing happened in art school, where you had a faculty and a student body that were predominantly white, especially in the fine arts departments, and there was no sense that the attitudes about art that were being taught came from a particular cultural position. There was no sense that the culture that was being taught was white culture; it was simply culture.

EB: What effect did that have on the kind of work you made?

JB: I always felt a certain pressure to make work about where I was from, about my identity. Of course this is a natural human thing, and white people make identity art too, it's just not called that. The big thing, for me, though, was that I was trying to make work that dealt with shifting cultural contexts without questioning the cultural context for which the work was made. It took me many years to realize that other values and other skills that I had could be combined with the skills that I learned in art school to create a more socially engaged practice.

EB: What is your work like now? How does it embody what you're saying?

JB: The work that is most directly influenced by the ideas that I'm talking about here is a series of collaborative projects, combining art and education, that I started about three years ago. In each project, I partnered up with educators, other artists, or an organization to create works that were both art and education.

One of the projects, called Visible Memories, was a half-mile-long artwork in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. I worked with a group of about thirty seventh-graders, and two wonderful educators named Sarah Morrison and Omar Roberts from "Life Lines" Community Arts Project. The idea was to reclaim public space - in this case storefronts and building facades along 4th Avenue - by exhibiting paintings based on stories from the community in spaces usually occupied by advertisements. Students interviewed people in the neighborhood to collect their stories, which covered issues including immigration, abortion, tenants' rights, and childhood obesity. The students turned what they learned into paintings that were hung along the avenue. They then gave tours of their work to school groups and the general public, which allowed them to share what they had learned with the community.

EB: You also did another project called Bodega Down Bronx. What was that about?



Jonathan Bogarín, the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), and New Settlement's Bronx Helpers, *Bodega Down Bronx*, 2008, video, 30 minutes, filming of interview with Congresswoman Nydia Velazquez.

JB: That was a six-month workshop resulting in a documentary film about the role bodegas play in urban neighborhoods, and how they fit into the larger issue of food access in low-income communities. It was made with two organizations: the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), which makes creative education projects about the urban environment, and New Settlement's Bronx Helpers, which is a community service organization. I worked with a group of eleventh- and twelfth-grade students, researching bodegas and local food access and learning video production skills. The students participated in pretty much every aspect of film production.

EB: In these collaborative projects it seems like a lot of different people have some say in the final piece. Do you still consider these projects part of your own work?

JB: Yeah, they are absolutely part of my practice and part of my own work. Each artist has the possibility of defining what constitutes their work, and for me in this case it's not just what I can make, but what I can help other people make as well.

EB: You do other work in addition to the art/education projects we've been talking about.

How do the other projects fit in with your questions about the role of an artist and the importance of considering the social context for which an artwork is made?

JB: The last project I want to mention, which is a little different from the art/education projects, is the documentary film you and I are working on together, called Invisible Murals or Murales Invisibles. It was shot in El Tigre, Venezuela, our father's hometown, and it's about oil, oral histories, and how all stories ultimately pass through this world and disappear. It's told through interviews, adaptations of local mythology, and stop-motion animated murals painted on-site. I think it's important to mention this project for two reasons: one is that it is also a collaborative project, in which the work is no more mine or yours. The project began as a series of murals based on paintings I was making in the studio, and through our collaboration, and the participation of so many people in El Tigre, it's taken on a whole other life.

The other thing that I think is really important about this project is that although I didn't realize it when we began, it addresses issues that I tried to tackle years ago. Beginning in college, I was trying to make work in the studio that somehow dealt with a sense of identity - I'm half Venezuelan and half Jewish, and look white, so moving between different cultural contexts has always been a given in my life. When I was working solely in the studio, the themes and images I was dealing with came predominantly from my own thoughts about identity and culture. What changed with the film in Venezuela was simply changing the context in which I was working, and allowing other peoples' voices into the project. Because we worked directly with so many people in El Tigre, their voices and perspectives have become an essential part of the film. Now, of course, the film that we end up making is going to be based on our own cultural biases and the fact that we grew up in North America, but it's also going to be a lot about what people shared and how people wanted to represent themselves. In that respect, it deals so much more with the overlapping of cultures that I've experienced in my life than I ever could have done had I simply been thinking to myself and making up images on my own.



Jonathan Bogarín and Elan Bogarín, *Invisible Murals*, 2006-2009, still from a feature-length documentary film.

EB: How you spoke about Murals connects very much to your theory of how to educate others. In some ways it seems that in this film you went back and forth between being an educator and being a student. How did your role in Murals connect to the way you interact with your students and with your various collaborators?

JB: I feel that the thing that draws the different projects together is a consciousness of the role that I want to play as an artist, and the flexibility about what that role can be. You reminded me of something one of my teachers taught me in college. He said: "Whatever you do, make sure that your art practice is something that teaches you, is something you can learn from." I remember not really knowing exactly what he meant, because my feeling about an art practice was that you were producing something, not that you were learning something. The thing about working collaboratively, and allowing myself to change my role and the context I'm working in, is that it's allowed me to share a lot of things with other people, but it's also allowed a lot of other people to share things with me. I feel that there is something very natural about that exchange. I think that's really what art should be about.