

A Thesis Presented to
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Towards an Intimate Social Practice

by

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There is no need to make any more art, to create more stuff, to add to the visual and physical clutter that surrounds us. But there is an urgent need for the mediations and insight that art provides humanity. I want to keep finding ways to make art without the anxiety of making art.

-Ernesto Pujoli

In my sculptural practice I have always wanted to connect with people. This frequently came from a position that I occupied as an artist with unwavering ideas of reality. I needed something to prove, a point to come across, and my disposition to be heard and seen. I needed to analyze and lay out facts for the viewer to see and learn. As an autodidactic, I assume that everybody thought like me, learned like me, made art like me.

Frequently our language and intention is incommunicable and culturally specific to our privileged position as artists. It is necessary for those who work with other people to really understand why they're doing their art, how long it is going to take, and what are the realistic outcomes. Furthermore, if it's appropriate to make the art at all.

There are certain ideas that cannot be created through solitary acts of art making. They need to be articulated by people, not *for* them. I had a conceptual realization that work *about* relationships is far less telling than a work that *includes* relationships, or that creates them. It is the difference between offering a negative criticism and an alternative model of use.

I have recently created my practice around my need for inclusion, solidarity, and foremost intimacy. Through art I can prototype change and in Augusto Boal's language, as "rehearsal for real life" if not life itself.

My work is composed of the avocation and creation of intimacy as a way to build solidarity among community.

Recently, my life and art has been full of insincere didacticism. Artists and people within my age group utilize tactics like irony to comment on our culture, chuckling with their cleverness and proud of their disposition on not being *them*. Satirical apathy and pointing fingers creates further distance between social groups of shared ecologies and culture. I use intimacy as a term for an oppositional framework to this culture that promotes assumptions, shit-talking, and spectatorship.

In order for the creation of intimacy to happen there must be sensual/shared-learning experience where something that was stereotyped, assumed, labeled becomes a distinguished being. That *other* that is usually commented on through art must situated *within* the work, and their opinion/participation generates the meaning. The image and identity that the artist or distinguished groups assumed of each other becomes replaced with the shared experience of knowing.

To do this we have to hack apart our social norms. We must create an art that can take our complacent ideas of our environment and through the potential interpersonal exchanges glean an intimate situation. In Gregg M. Horowitz's words,

we need to “try to enliven situations, to make what otherwise would be unanimated space, or at least space that’s simply *there*, alive with fresh points of view.”ⁱⁱ

A part of creating intimacy is to recognize the singularity of a peculiar experience. It is to take our abstract ideas of the community, the environment, love, and art itself, and replace these through tangible exchanges.

Intimate exchanges are the only ethical way of persisting change. This is because the interaction has to be reciprocal and through a specific, articulated experience.

In my sculpture practice I’ve created public works where the reciprocity was non-existent. An example of this is my Lou series.

During my spring semester junior year and fall semester Senior Year I created the autonomous social identity Lou. Lou was a non-gender specific, public identity that anybody could occupy. I created a barbeque for Lou in which if you declared yourself Lou (by means of wearing a free button pin and telling others that you’re Lou) you could get a free hotdog. The other event was a registration booth for Lou, where you wrote your new universal identity on a small piece of adhesive paper and taped it over your given name on your school ID card, then take a *selfie* with a disposable camera and became archived with all the other Lous.

In both situations I was interested in creating a feeling of inclusivity and had blank note cards that you could answer these three questions:

Lou thinks community is:

Lou’s thoughts on Love:

Lou thinks art should be:

By attempting to create a sincere gesture, I was asking a lot from my audience without giving them anything in return beyond a metaphor of potential change. This form of altruism, while enjoyable, doesn't contain the dialogue possible for creating new intimacies.

Another example of the non-reciprocal exchanges in my practice is my series of social choreographic sequences that I did in the Alfred Village Hall, unnamed during the execution but later called *Solidarity Movements*. These events consisted of movements of standing up/sitting down and switching chairs in a sequential manner in two New England religion inspired seating arrangements—a circle inspired by Quakerism, a Shaker arrangement where women and men sat in separated rows but faced each other.

These movements were performed by fifteen of my friends and myself. Some people were massively uncomfortable with the religious connotations, prolonged stares, strict framework, and serious manner. After the first meeting they rightfully questioned my motives; many didn't even have fun!

I was searching for the feeling of intimacy I had felt at a Quaker meeting two years ago in which I felt closer to a group of strangers than I did with my college peer group of four years. This public attempt at altruism was met with rightful skepticism.

Most events don't bother with intimacy. They are informative and attempt to raise consciousness. This is because intimacy is difficult for most people. It is non-hierarchical, and in order for it to happen there must be a equality between

individuals. You cannot evoke intimacy without giving some of yourself—otherwise it is just yet another form of voyeurism, manipulation, or spectacle.

Artists are privileged. Our historic situation allows us to freely antagonize and trick the public. We also traditionally create work in absence of solidarity—for patrons and in spaces with false political notions that merely contribute to a polemic debate that doesn't have relevance beyond ourselves.

With my art I do not want to create a gesture of didacticism. I want a process that starts off with an immediate validation of the opinions of individuals, and use our collective knowledge and experience to create something ecstatic—intimate.

What is the scale of intimacy?

What is the maximum amount of people that can participate in a structured, intimate gesture? How many people can engage together and co-author an experience through genuine dialogue, and at what point does the scale create space for neglect and exclusion? It is important to recognize the limitations of an individual or group effort of intimacy, and see the necessity of continuously creating these gestures rather than aiming for the large all-inclusive, universal, non-place-specific end all action.

I see a dangerous side to attempting larger scale, systemic actions. Reciprocal/intimate exchanges that are quantified for maximum impact end up being evangelistic or altruistic. If recreating the structure without the initial reciprocity, you end up giving an idea of yourself or a superfluous endowment instead of your own physical and emotional labor. Then, the people participating are witnesses to yourself but unknowingly detached from your actual being. This kind

of gesture is what happens when you go beyond an intimate scale towards an unsustainable practice with hopes of maximum impact and change without effecting yourself.

I have made two large projects that have the emotional and intellectual reciprocity that constitutes for intimacy. They are the residency of Theatre of the Oppressed NYC (TONYC), and the Alfred Community Garden AUcommunity Outreach Program.

The Residency of TONYC came out of my previous misplaced efforts to invoke intimacy in-group settings. More importantly, it was an idea that came from outside my interests in participatory art and stemmed from my friendships with women, most importantly the honest/frequently hilarious and joyful relationship that I'm in with my partner Emily. These experiences of art and celebration in my life were juxtaposed with the many highly publicized cases of sexual harassment and evident masculine violence/gender inequality at large and in Alfred. As a male I felt detached yet partially responsible for our rape culture—especially that it took me twenty-two years to see what was explicitly unraveling all around me. Without recognizing it, the informal language that I grew up using was largely misogynistic and homophobic. This phallocentricism was undermined through intimate experiences with queer friends, lovers, and non-heteronormative men. Through dialogue and self-reflection I was able to create friendships with people whom I initially saw as distanced others.

I wanted to directly address our culture's ideas of masculinity through art and I found that coordinating a workshop in the Theatre of the Oppressed tactic would be the most effective.

In its most essential terms, oppression is when somebody needs something and cannot get it because of who they are. The individuals who oppress are incapable of intimacy—however they categorize people that share a specific appearance, class, gender or religion into an empirical group that is different and below them. But, similar to intimacy these assumptions are often reciprocated. Oppression is systemic; the assumptions of the oppressors are frequently matched by assumptions of the oppressed. If the oppressed got power over the oppressors, there would be a similar instance of oppression but with the reverse power dynamic. There has to be a shift of consciousness in both roles in order to overcome oppression.ⁱⁱⁱ

In order to have a shared, intimate experience between individuals, it is necessary to break down existing dichotomies of each other and recognize the individuality and valid experience of all people in that group. This happened in the Residency of TONYC between seventeen students. We came in with our different experiences with racism, sexism, student-debt, and other forms of widely-faced student oppression.

Theatre of the Oppressed is a methodology founded by Augusto Boal in the 1960s. It is a “physical and playful tool used to interactively investigate situations in which we are denied our basic rights, personally and collectively.”^{iv}

Workshops are led by “Jokers”, unbiased, humored facilitators named after the Joker card, which doesn’t belong to any suit. In our workshop the Joker was John Leo from TONYC. The workshop participants represented a large demographic of the student body of Alfred University. (Out of the seventeen participants there were only four art students and more people of color than in the whole School of Art & Design).

The Joker facilitates exercises that promote *good confusion*, where our assumptions of language and both physical and intellectual cultural programming are questioned. An example is the exercise “Name Gumbo”, where participants introduce themselves to each other and then swap names. After several exchanges few people are left with their original names and frequently through these handshakes several names begin to disappear or quantify. By the end of the process in a group of fourteen there could be eight “Daves”.^v

After all exercises there are group discussions centered on the personal, subjective experiences of individuals. After “name gumbo” in our workshop, we had a dialogue of what it feels like to have your identity dictated by another individual—many participants just wanted to be called by their name while others felt comfortable with the excessive changes of identity.

The workshop games are shared experiences that build up solidarity among the group. Through the process its participants create lists of their shared ideas of Human Rights and tell their stories of oppression. What eventually happens is that common themes and similar instances of oppression are articulated and co-

authored by the group. They are then created into small scenes that are performed for a *Forum Theatre*.

In our *Forum Theatre*, we had three scenes. Scene One was an instance in which a student received a large medical bill and whereupon trying to absolve it was meant with confusion and ignorance by the Health & Wellness Center staff, parents, and representatives from their insurance company. Scene Two was a reenactment of an instance in a classroom where a teacher made a racially insensitive joke about somebody's culture. When the student attempted to tell the teacher about how they felt, the teacher dismissed the potential dialogue. In Scene Three a student was walking and called "faggot" by a group of male students. When attempting to do something about it she was caught between unclear information, paperwork, and hesitant responses from our Bias Response Team.

Although all three scenes were dramatized and collaboratively created, all of them were place specific, and while names were changed the institutions within Alfred were kept.

The public presentation of these plays are vastly different from other forms of theatre; in a *Forum Theatre* the audience are not passive viewers, they are *spectators*, a combination of spectator and actor. Before the performances they are led through simple name games and call and response prompts by the Joker. After watching a performance they are called upon by the Joker to talk about what happened in the play and if there was oppression. They are then prompted to talk to the person sitting next to them about a different way of approaching the situation. It is at this point that if a *spectator* has an idea of what they would do they are

allowed to get up, switch roles with the oppressed character and performed the play using their response. This form of creative problem solving drafts new solutions to instances of oppression. We were able to come up with solutions for these systemic problems through a process of watching the play, reenacting it and searching for new alternatives, then taking suggestions from the audience in the form of written responses.

Our particular *Forum Theatre* was also a *Legislative Theatre*. This means that during the *Forum Theatre* there was a group of *Policy Makers* in attendance. They were representatives from Student Affairs, Center for Academic Success, The Judson Leadership Center, Residence Life, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences, and the Health and Wellness Center. It was their duty to take these suggestions from the audience for systemic change and come up with tangible actions to resolve them.

Because of Scene One there will be additional training for Wellness Center Staff in understanding student options in bill payment. The suggestions of scene two lead to Student Affairs developing a workshop for professors on how to appropriately address and create space for student “challenges” towards opinions on their teaching and insensitive commentary, as well as a visual campaign on who to approach about instances. Scene Three prompted necessary follow up by the Health & Wellness Center staff after initial meetings regarding sexual harassment, and a more concise direction on protocol for dealing with sexual harassment created by the Bias Response Team.

Through the performance and follow up the performed scenes were no longer *about* something, they *were* empowering moments of overcoming

oppression—making a confrontational and reflective space that only art can occupy and ushering change.

In her book *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop articulates this moment in art where something can be metaphoric and real at the same time:

Both an event in the world, and at one removed from it. As such, it has the capacity to communicate on two levels—to participants and to spectators—the paradoxes that are repressed in everyday discourse, and to elicit perverse disturbing and pleasurable experiences that enlarge our capacity to imagine a world and our relations anew.^{vi}

These multiple levels of communication are the most important facets of art. Art that embodies the honest and sincere ideas of people, then presents those ideas to others who don't have the same perspective can create blasphemous, confrontational, or libratory experiences. If this moment of abasement is followed with a reciprocal gesture, than there is a potential for intimacy.

All of us attending the workshop lived through the difficult rehearsing of social change because of our commonality for wanting to eliminate these moments of oppression. This experience was a dialogical response that showed solidarity around individuals' moments of oppression. This all happened through the intimate situation where we witnessed conflict and attempted to understand it together.

The residency of TONYC was a powerful tool for drafting a new social space, and was successful in it's systemic impact and creation of intimacy among the workshop participants and solidarity within the final performance.

I can say that the process of coordinating the residency and attending the workshop was a transformative experience for me as well. Through the process of seeking funding for the workshop I became conscious of the oppression of others. Being a white male with a predominantly white peer group (coming from a mostly white upbringing), I did not think there were race issues on campus because there weren't any in my peripheral and I was focused on issues of gender. The opposite was made painfully clear during a panel on the shootings and riots in Ferguson, Missouri, where many students of color talked passionately about their oppressive reality in Alfred.

I also saw it necessary to participate in the workshop. As somebody who has reflected upon my own oppressive tendencies, I found myself being worried in the Theatre of the Oppressed process that I would be seen as an unproductive participant because of my lack of experience with oppression. As benign as this is after the fact, I realize that it is a very common privileged disposition to believe that you cannot be empathetic towards others.

Although there was a strong impact and subsequent creation of solidarity from the event, there were also instances within the workshop and performance that did not provoke intimacy. Many teachers who were *spectators* were detached from the process because of its student-centered responses and felt that they couldn't voice their opinions during the performance, and others, including several *policy makers*, didn't know what the *Legislative Theatre* entailed and felt either falsely accused by the performers or uncomfortable with the situation as a whole. When coordinating I wanted the event to be as inclusive and huge as possible, but

the performance was not small enough to be fully intimate and not large enough to feel comfortable passively watching. (It is also important to note that during this point in the process it doesn't *need* to be intimate, for the moment of intimacy can happen after the fact upon dialogues catalyzed by the event itself or the policy changes.)

The event became more intimate after the first two hours, when we were kicked out of Nevins Theatre by Student Senate and had to move upstairs to a more casual space. After the event the workshop attendees and *Joker* John Leo went to Applebees and had a communal celebration.

Because of the workshop I can relate to a community of sixteen people, which is far better than before. It is with this comparison of the workshop itself and the public performance that I will question the potential scale of intimacy for future projects.

A single instance of intimacy can give you solidarity with a group of people and create a community of individuals. When creating a structure for these instances it is important to consider what the catalyst is around the situation. For the Residency of TONYC, it was a collected concern for human rights on campus. For the Alfred Community Garden Community Outreach Program, it was an enthusiasm for gardening.

It was my intention with the Alfred Community Garden AUcommunity Outreach Program to create intimate exchanges between two groups that don't necessarily connect—students and community gardeners.

I started with the disposition that everybody is right in doing what they do—especially students. We are within an academic institution that promotes many actions that devalue intimacy, such as individualism through academic achievement and award gratification, and a pedagogic approach that makes group work as an unwarranted but necessary labor exchange instead of interpersonal exploration. With the constant work it is hard to recognize the permanent community in Alfred.

This sheltering, albeit unintentional, from outside of the school is an oppressive situation that is so embedded within our experiences that we don't even recognize that we're neglecting people who are themselves individuals. This is seen by our trashing of public spaces and lack of participation in village politics or community programs.

What I recognized through my social practice and coordinating is the need for creating an intimate learning experience. It is useless to teach somebody an action in hopes of changing the way in which they function. As an artist I see it more important to create an experience where we can build a collective understanding, making a new ideological base in which further actions can be built upon. With this in mind I consider addressing the *idea* of sustainability, rather than the technologies and processes around it.

I conceptually reoriented my practice towards the necessity of empathy, whereas my previous attempts at making public events with Green Alfred, our club sustainability group, were very serious and apathetic to people who weren't already interested in ideas around deep ecology or community engagement (there weren't too many of them).

This fundamental change in process was played out in the Alfred Community Garden AU Community Outreach Program. It started through collaborating with the Alfred Community Garden in an idea that stemmed from common interests in the holistic importance of gardening and the want for further student involvement within the community.

The structure of the program was based around three exchanges between students and community gardeners. In order to round up participants and be as approachable as possible, I made a large, wonky rickshaw and simply lugged it around Alfred with some planters, stopping and talking to whoever seemed interested. I also would park in public spaces and play the banjo in a lawn chair. This mimicry of a farmers market set up with added eccentric touches framed the proceeding interaction whereupon I would ask them about gardening and tell them about the project.

The first exchange happened between a community gardener and myself. I would give them a small wooden planter and they would fill it up with soil from their garden and give it back to me with some seeds. The gesture of giving away a planter is inherently altruistic but not intimate. In this circumstance I am providing the planter as a catalyst for the potential intimacy between a student and a community member

The second exchange consisted of me giving planters to various students. The students would then plant the seeds and connect with the gardener whose planter they were stewarding.

In the third exchange the student will either hand off the planter or plant the plants into the community gardener's garden, who will then take care of it for the summer while the student is away. Through their shared stewardship and labor of taking care of the plant there is the potential to break down preconceived ideas of community, environment, and student and refine it to be more place specific.

The culmination of these exchanges will be a convening with all participants in the fall. We will bring the harvestings from the planters and have a communal dinner. Whatever we don't eat will be canned/fermented and equally distributed or composted, leading to future exchanges around planting or eating. We will also create a diagram of the different places the planters travelled during their stewardship.

As of this moment the project is in-between the second and third exchanges. Communication between students and myself is lacking, but those that I've been in contact with are taking their own initiative with their planters. For example, Abby Schmeichel planted Ana Gauthier's seeds later than she would've wished to, however she's going to bring the planter home and plant a third in her mother's garden, a third in her dad's, and a third in pots. She's planning on bringing the pots of Ana's Basil to the meal in the fall.

The social ecology that was created through the Alfred Community Garden AUcommunity Outreach Project is vast. There were over twenty planters given out between over forty gardeners and students, each individual creating their own narrative through the stewardship process. The intimate situation will be created in

the fall once we collectively come together and describe these experiences and celebrate our shared labor and stories revolving around the natural growth season.

Similarly to the *Legislative Theatre* event within the residency of TONYC, the shared meal will be an instance that can map the trajectory of further intimate moments.

Through the continuation of similar gestures we can aspire to towards a new cultural framework—one that can be radical not only in its persistence in equality, but also one that validates and encourages the creation of art through interpersonal exchange and dialogue, where something as routine as watering a plant becomes ruminate.

A sustainable action is an action that promotes further intimacy. The reverence for beings can only happen after we break down and recreate our own ideas of community and environment. The potential for these kinds of actions are abundant, however there needs to be a catalyst for this social change.

We artists need to get over ourselves. By thinking that we are more important we exempt ourselves from the considerations of the many. Our artistic-expression is not more important than anybody else's. As an artist who has had the privilege of solitary crafting objects and situations, I've created many works that peers, artists, and parents could not understand and then disappear. With the need for meaningful and sustaining work I move towards an intimate social practice where the ecstatic, wonky, and equal are reciprocated through collective gestures, creating a communal space for meaning.

ⁱ Finkelpearl, Tom, *What We Made: Conversations on Art & Social Cooperation* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2013), 110.

ⁱⁱ Ibid., 72.

ⁱⁱⁱ This idea of oppression is taken from Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

^{iv} "About-Theatre of the Oppressed NYC," Theatre of the Oppressed NYC, accessed May 10th, 2015

<http://www.theatreoftheoppressednyc.org/about.html>

^v my understanding of the Theatre of the Oppressed games is built upon Theatre of the Oppressed NYC workshops that I've attended. The Theatre of the Oppressed tactic is practiced worldwide and methodologies vary greatly.

^{vi} Bishop, Claire, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), 284.