Fusing Art, Economics and Social Reform: YA/YA's Art as Activism

Patrick Fahey & Linda Frickman

To cite this article: Patrick Fahey & Linda Frickman (2000) Fusing Art, Economics and Social Reform: YA/YA's Art as Activism, Art Education, 53:5, 40-45

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2000.11652409

Published online: 22 Dec 2015.

Article views: 7

View related articles

Citing articles: 2 View citing articles
Since YA/YA's beginnings in 1988, a lively arts community of commercial galleries has sprung up on nearby Julia Street and the surrounding area. YA/YA has become an active participant in collaborative public relations endeavors (gallery guides, artwalks, special openings) aimed at strengthening the economic viability of this community and YA/YA students are actively involved in these events.

On a late Thursday afternoon in October, Madeleine Neske, commercial art teacher at Rabouin Magnet High School in downtown New Orleans, leads a critique with a group of high school students and alumni who call themselves the YA/YAs. As she does each Thursday afternoon, Neske directs a demanding and rigorous critique. Students assess the painted screens they are finishing for the next exhibition and clarify the conceptual and formal decisions that inform the works. They also discuss whether the paintings are marketable and a side conversation ensues regarding relationships between personal artistic intent and commercial viability. The critique illuminates the unique character of the organization known as YA/YA—Young Aspirations/Young Artists—now in its 12th year of existence. YA/YA strives to give marginalized youth opportunities to make art, sell art, reap the financial benefits, express themselves and excel in the process. YA/YA is an interesting project teaching adolescents life and entrepreneurial skills through art; a model focusing on community based art projects that agitate for social change, a paradigm that finds its roots in the art of the 1960s and 1970s.

The Beginning

YA/YA was founded in 1988 when local New Orleans artist Jana Napoli invited students from Rabouin Magnet High School to work in her studio around the corner from their school. Tired of neighboring business people's disparaging remarks about the mostly African-American students at Rabouin, Napoli was determined to establish a relationship with the students she encountered everyday. With eight Rabouin students and the assistance of art teacher Madeleine Neske, Napoli organized an exhibition of their paintings of historic New Orleans buildings and invited city and business officials to the opening. When all the paintings sold, she realized the potential for using art to promote the students' self-esteem, teach entrepreneurial skills, and develop positive attitudes toward education.
The work that YA/YA is best known for developed shortly afterwards with the donation of several second gold chairs, tables and chiffoniers which the students painted with vibrant colors and bold designs. Napoli and Neske challenged them to paint their stories on the furniture. As Claudia Barker (1996) wrote,

When Jane told the YA/YAs to paint their hopes and dreams, she not only gave them an assignment, she gave them permission to search their souls for an experience and a set of feelings that could be made into art. It is that depth of feeling that makes the YA/YA work seem so vivid and alive. (p. 20)

YA/YA also capitalized on the location of both the school and studio in the central business district of New Orleans. Rabouin Magnet High School is alone in the New Orleans public school system in its emphasis on the world of work. Not a neighborhood school, Rabouin instead brings students into the business sector as part of its emphasis toward training youth for viable employment. YA/YA similarly forges relationships with the neighborhood. Since YA/YA's beginnings in 1988, a lively arts community of commercial galleries has sprung up on nearby Julia Street and the surrounding area. YA/YA has become an active participant in collaborative public relations endeavors (gallery guides, artwalks, special openings) aimed at strengthening the economic viability of this community and YA/YA students are actively involved in these events.

YA/YA Today

YA/YA now bills itself as an arts and social service organization. It aims to provide educational experiences and opportunities to empower artistically talented inner-city youth and develop self-sufficiency. The workshop is organized to educate young designers to work with corporate organizations and to demonstrate the centrality of visual images and strong design to their success. During the past 11 years students have worked with clients such as Swatch Ltd., Hammacher-Schlemmer, Burger King, MTV, Italian designer Alessandro Mendini, Wembly Tie Company and the New Orleans Opera Association. Under the direction of Napoli and Neske, practicing artists head the furniture workshop, the print shop and a retail gallery. These artists, in turn, assist students in the creation of their work. Print YA/YA, for example, founded in 1993 by artist Terry Weldon, designs and prints fabric for sale and licensing to manufacturers. The marriage of art, craft and business is not unlike William Morris's 19th century Arts and Crafts Movement and the 20th century experiment at the Bauhaus, where director Gropius sought to find a place for the artist in the industrial age.

Similarly, the structure of YA/YA recalls both the medieval artisan system and the modern Arts and Crafts Movement. Once accepted into the organization, students begin at the entry level, progress to apprentice and eventually apply for guild memberships. The growth of the program has led to the initiation of a fourth
level, to include alumni students—those presently enrolled in college. To remain a YA/YA participant, students must stay in school, maintain a C average and perform community service. Students have the opportunity to travel if they improve their grades and maintain a B average. The importance of school is stressed in every aspect of the project. Students receive needed assistance with homework, college applications and portfolio development. Other educational opportunities are available through internships in the workshops and YA/YA business office where students learn accounting, technical writing and public relations skills.

All students are encouraged to pursue university studies. Guild members are required to set aside 30% of profits from their sales for college tuition and expenses. The meaning of "university studies" is flexible (some students attend 4-year institutions, some community colleges, some art school, some apprenticeships; even Job Corps experience is counted)—the message is that education is linked to self-sufficiency. Students not seeking further study forfeit their profits to YA/YA for operating expenses and educational programs for remaining students.

Over the years the number of students served by YA/YA has grown. From a core group of 8 students in its first year of operation, YA/YA now has approximately 30 active students working in the Baronne Street studio. This growth reflects a new policy instituted in 1998 which opened the application opportunities and welcomed students from all New Orleans public high schools.
YA/YA, Postmodern Art and Capitalism

In its 10 years of existence YA/YA has been rewarded with a spate of good publicity. Articles have appeared in *Newsday, Vogue, Rolling Stone, Family Circle, Metropolitan Home,* and *The New York Times* among many others, chronicling the success of the young commercial designers from New Orleans. Interestingly, the story of YA/YA has had less coverage in the art press. Perhaps problematic is that YA/YA does not fit the traditional art world paradigm.

YA/YA promotes adolescent art. Nicholas Paley (1995) notes that despite the need for young people to have their voices heard, the work of children and adolescents is devalued in our culture—such art work is rarely recognized.

In addition, YA/YA functions unapologetically as an economic and social agency. YA/YA, like many other public art experiments (Tim Rollins and Kids of Survival, Shooting Back, and *The Theatre of the Homeless*) blurs boundaries. Like many projects that empower marginalized communities through cultural production, YA/YA’s primary function is seen by many not as art but as social work. However, precedents for such effort have been set as early as the mid-19th century, with artist and social reformer William Morris. Morris attempted to engage workers in the production of well crafted objects in order to provide employment, economic security and resist what he saw as negative effects in society as a result of industrialism and capitalism.

YA/YA has also been omitted from the recent postmodern art publications on “connective aesthetics” (Gablik, 1995, p. 74) and education publications on “school to career” programs. Important publications on public and activist art, among them Suzanne Lacy’s *Mapping the Terrain* (1995) and Nina Felshin’s *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism* (1995), attempt to document the recent explosion of projects in this vein and provide needed resources for artists who wish to work in this framework. YA/YA belongs with these examples. Yet YA/YA does not easily fit the connective paradigm. Art historians and critics involved with the theoretical justification for activist art write that modernism is characterized by the privileging of the individual and argue for a new aesthetic based on cooperation and collaboration. YA/YA promotes a spirit of community and upholds the privilege of the individual by promoting individual work and the development of an individual style. A few projects stress collaboration, but most YA/YA work is produced by individual designers.

The reduction of the modern art object to a commodity is another issue addressed by these postmodern critics. Gablik (1995) writes, “Manic production and consumption, competitive self assertion, and the maximizing of profits are all crucial to our society’s notion of success…. Art itself is not some ancillary phenomenon but is heavily implicated in this ideology” (p. 74). Gablik calls for an art that ceases to participate in capitalist culture. YA/YA recognizes and actively works within the framework of corporate capitalism to reach moral and social goals, a pairing that may seem a paradox when first observed. To YA/YA, the production of saleable objects ensures success and allows young artists to see immediate economic rewards. Students receive percentages of the sale of their art work. Percentages increase as the students move through the guild system. Paralleling a corporate model, those who progress and take on more responsibility within the organization are rewarded with a greater share of profit.

To YA/YA, the production of saleable objects ensures success and allows young artists to see immediate economic rewards. Students receive percentages of the sale of their art work. Percentages increase as the students move through the guild system. Paralleling a corporate model, those who progress and take on more responsibility within the organization are rewarded with a greater share of profit. Clearly, YA/YA is a complex entity that does not lend itself easily to current paradigms in art and education, either traditional or postmodern.
Empowerment

YA/YA is an exemplar that successfully demonstrates many of Morris's attempts to fuse social reform and artmaking. Although opposed to capitalism, which YA/YA successfully uses and indeed embraces, Morris attempted to address the circumstances of the working class and the dispossessed in his own time. YA/YA addresses the needs of the “at risk” segment of contemporary adolescent urban society. The YA/YA’s dislike the term “at risk” and complain that the press focuses on this issue alone—though they are savvy enough to recognize the economic and political importance of using the term in fund raising efforts. A large mural on the front wall of their gallery asks “What dah hell iz ah inner city yoot?” and they fear that terms like “at risk” will only perpetuate stereotypes about African American youth. Yet the social goals of YA/YA achieved through art making and business are paramount. First, the project addresses the need to provide opportunities for students after school, during the hours when most adolescents are at risk. Statistics from the FBI and National Center for Juvenile Justice show that juvenile crime, for example, triples at 3 p.m. (Alter, 1998, p. 32). Staff member Maria LoVullo notes that parents are supportive of the program. “They want their kids to be here. It’s a safe environment. They know they’re doing something. They’re not on the street” (personal communication, September 25, 1997).

YA/YA also addresses the need for career opportunities within the minority community and parallels recent government efforts to move people from reliance on welfare and government assistance to self-sustaining jobs. Barker notes the disproportionate rates of unemployment for black males compared to other groups, and Neske stresses “we are not talking about using a squeegy” (Thompson, 1992).

The training that YA/YA provides is much more than vocational. The skills acquired while being an active member of the workshop are plentiful. This unique collaboration between Napoli and Neske provides a means for adolescents to bring their voices into the mainstream and demonstrates that their voices have value. In addition to creating works of art, the YA/YAs are responsible for deadlines, proposals, quotes, budgets, and meetings with potential clients in all corporate contracts. This enables students to interact with the business/corporate culture and teaches them how to function in the commercial world. Both business and service projects often require that students travel and bring them into contact not only with the New Orleans business community but with other cultural groups throughout the United States and the world. The YA/YAs learn to maneuver through different cultures, yet throughout this process they are never asked to compromise their own beliefs and histories. Indeed, YA/YA work is reflective of their own culture. It is black, urban, adolescent, and hip-hop.
moves directly into the marketplace and in doing so uses the dominant culture to carry its own voice further.

Conclusion
YA/YA has survived because the participants recognize their situation and respond. Paulo Freire (1970, 1996) notes that efforts to help the marginalized are often begun in response to viewing them as objects needing assistance. Objectifying the marginalized denies them their humanity. Freire (1996) contends that instead, the approach should be one of problem posing—painting your hopes, dreams and fears: “Problem posing bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality...it affirms men and women as beings in the process of becoming” (p. 65).

Patrick Fahey is an Associate Professor in the Department of Art at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, and can be contacted at pfahey@lamar.colostate.edu.

Linda Frickman is Director of the Hatton Gallery in the Department of Art at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, and can be contacted at lfrickman@vines.colostate.edu.

REFERENCES
Alter, J. (1998, April). It’s 4:00 p.m.: Do you know where your children are? Newsweek, p. 32.