

May 2008

Somewhere to begin

I began writing last year as I was starting to teach at Youth UpRising in East Oakland. I developed a syllabus based on guerilla-style filmmaking and media re-appropriation through digital technology. Ever since we have tried to operate off the grid by working with and within different organizations to support our vision and goals. To develop independence in an oversaturated media market we need to spread our messages in traditional and new ways. Our base at Youth UpRising is the opportunity to imagine ways of thinking and creating driven by young people with the energy to change things. Because we are an after school program, we can offer free training in multimedia literacy and production to everyone who is a member. Our goal now is to turn this free training opportunity into an employment model for young media producers.

Art must remain our primary driving force because there are so many channels for self-expression now available to young people. We are developing our visual imagination with photography, video and web design tools. Our current exhibit at the Oakland Museum of California entitled “Cool Remixed” is an example of institutional and independent channels of communication meeting within artistic self-expression. We produced a photo/video mural about TURF dancing in East Oakland. TURF stands for Taking Up Room on the Floor and its latest evolutions within the hyphy movement were captured in our piece about space and time and the we-writing of shapes and movements through dance. Please see the pictures, video and reviews about the show running through the summer.

(“Cool Remixed” at Oakland Museum of California, main gallery,

May 17th – August 17th 2008.

Photos at http://www.jasonlewphoto.com/OaklandMuseum/080522_Cool_Remixed/

Video preview at <http://youtube.com/watch?v=XbYqf1K8XbQ>

and please read the review at <http://www.kqed.org/arts/visualarts/index.jsp?id=22767>)

Art must tie in to emerging trends in multimedia production for the web. We have tried to use the Internet as a way to integrate all of our media production in photography and video, from

shooting to editing and in web design. The news media market is trying to adapt to new communication techniques relying on a truly integrated approach to information gathering and sharing. People need to know about how their lives tie in to global issues while accessing the resources necessary to find solutions to problems in local communities. Young people need to have a voice within a changing world in which they have more and more control. Employment through multimedia production for the web is a way to develop a youth-led approach to communication and self-expression in art, journalism and any form of media inspiring the youth.

An example of integrated communication is our ongoing collaboration with the Oakland Tribune website. We produced a multimedia story about youth-led creative strategies to deal with violence in the everyday. The carceral system is one of the most confining and repressive influences in the environment young people have to grow up in today. From juvenile detention to incarceration, a culture of separation and isolation spreads into the everyday. We found that poetry can be a way for young people in particular to express their feelings, doubts and questions about the way our society has chosen to organize and divide people. With our reporting we are bringing forth stories about detention and release, silence and expression. Although the story was already published in the resource section of the Oakland Tribune's 2007 reporting on violence in Oakland, this is an ongoing project.

(The story is published with the 2007 Stop Youth Violence project we produced last fall at http://www.insidebayarea.com/oaklandhomicides/ci_935694 And the direct link to Prison & Poetry is at <http://www.opentosolutions.com/poetry>)

We are now beginning to collaborate with the Alameda County Behavioral Health department of Transition Age Youth Services. Our team of youth producers will work on stories about health in their community. This is a way for young people in Alameda County to get access to services often inaccessible to them. There are communication gaps in almost every way our society tries to educate young people and the media is one of the driving forces of disinformation or entertainment. It is necessary for young people to understand the media language used to convey these repetitive messages and create an opportunity for our voice to be heard. We can influence various institutions by inspiring new audiences and new platforms for creative media production. Through these collaborations between young people and the institutions designed to serve them,

we hope to develop a sustainable and reproducible model for training and employment in the multimedia arts.

Our main challenge is acquiring the tools and developing the strategies to teach these to more people. We are encouraged to pass on newly acquired skills to others so they can learn faster and make more efficient use of the limited equipment we have access to. Through the Mayor Summer Job Program this summer we plan to have 15 paid interns in the program to generate media for different channels of self-expression and alternative production. The syllabus I designed a year ago for media literacy and production, along with my writing at the time is still relevant today as the vision developed last summer is being put into practice now. (Please see my paper about Space, Image and Identity: Praxis of Imagination for Youth and Social Change published in the Berkeley McNair Journal Spring 2008 at <http://www-mcnair.berkeley.edu/mcnj2008wcov.pdf>). In the past year, I have focused more on teaching and finding ways to create a team of youth producers and I plan to begin writing about my experiences and questions about this work and how it fits within what I set out to do in my education, art and work.

I feel like change is on the way and soon people will be more understanding about the urgency in promoting unity to prepare for times of need. We need to tell stories to others but also to ourselves about who we are and why we do the work we do. I have learned this through my experiences working in more sectors in the economy than I can count, stretching across continents, from goat herding in the South of France to tiling a bathroom in the Oakland Hills or tutoring math and French in community college. There is a sense of worth and value generated in the opportunity to work towards something, a vision and a goal. When the vision and goal meet with other's needs and wants there is a creative synergy pushing a re-imagination of how to work and what to work for.

In building a literature review geared towards supporting critical media literacy, I have had to look in many different directions, expressions and platforms. I am inspired by works from France because of my dual citizenship and my personal, linguistic and cultural ties to the country. The French experimental filmmaker Chris Marker made a movie called *Sans Soleil* (1983) about travel and memory, space and time, in which he quotes Miguel Torga as saying:

“Every protagonist represents only himself; in place of a change in the social setting he seeks simply in the revolutionary act the sublimation of his own image.”

We could indeed be trapped within a creative process of sublimation because the emotions and transformations involved in the work are real and their consequences can be felt in the weight of many decisions in the everyday about what to do where or how young people spend their time. However there is chance that the questions might be similar to the ones posed by the French journalist and author Albert Camus. He wrote about rebellion and the role it plays in history, from politics to education and art. He writes:

“Rebellion, in fact, says – and will say more and more explicitly that revolution must try to act, not in order to come into existence at some future date in the eyes of a world reduced to acquiescence, but in terms of the obscure existence that is only manifest in the act of insurrection. This rule is neither formal nor subject to history, it is what can be best described by examining it in its pure state – in artistic creation. Before doing so, let us only note that to the “I rebel, therefore we exist” and the “We are alone” of metaphysical rebellion, rebellion at grips with history adds that instead of killing and dying in order to produce the being that we are not, we have to live and let live in order to create what we are.” (Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, 1956: 151).

Through similar processes we hope to arrive at a better understanding of social change for urban youth in America today while being engaged in it. These are just some of the thoughts and experiences I wanted to share about where I am coming from with this project just now beginning. By way of where I am going now, I hope to become a part of the change I see and speak of.