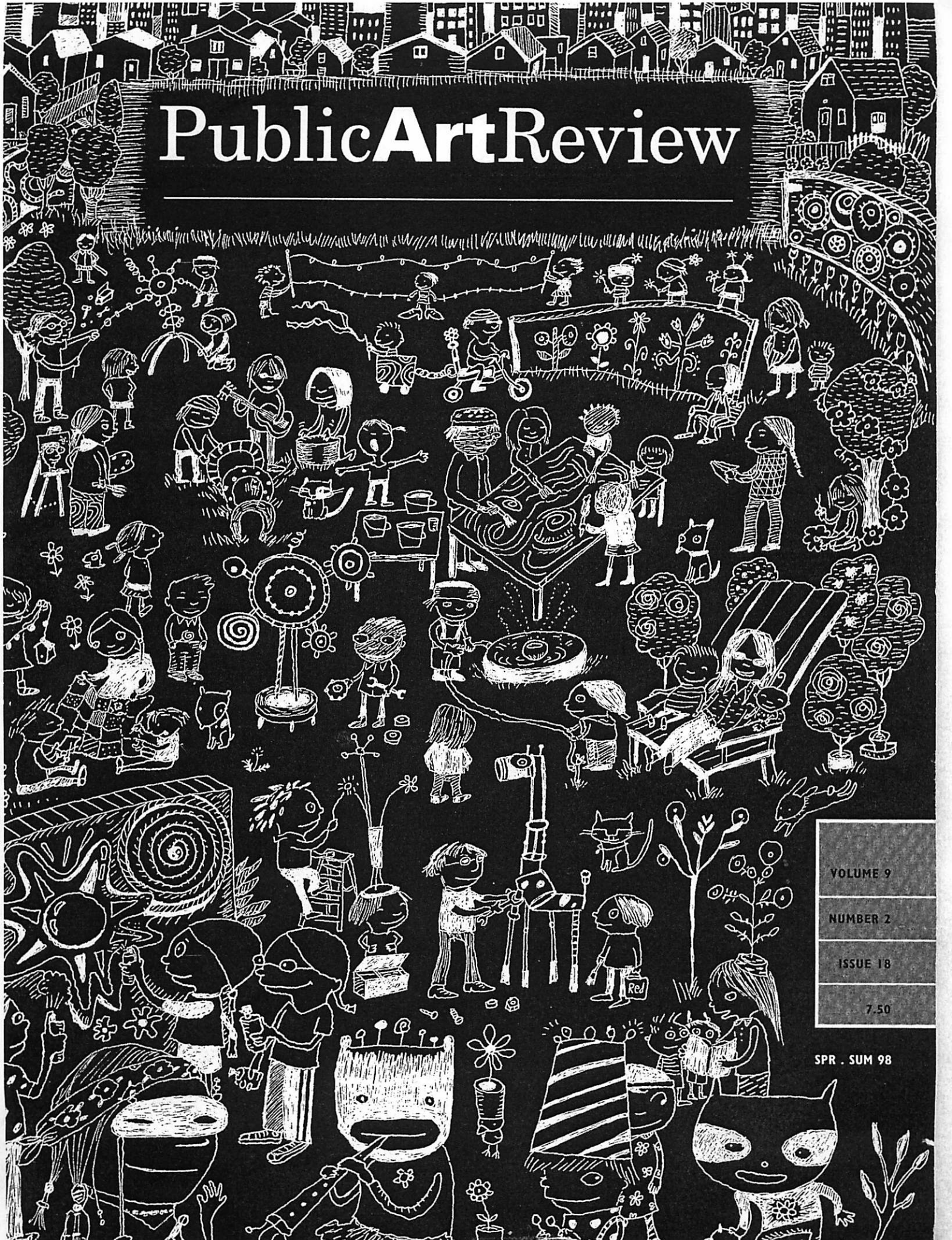


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# EXPLODING THE MODEL

ON YOUTH AND ART

Alyson Pou

*Author's Note: On December 9, 1997 the author convened a discussion on the topic of public art and education at the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York City. Invited participants were artists Sheila de Bretteville, Peggy Diggs, Andrew Ginzel, Julia Meltzer, Pepon Osorio, Amanda Ramos, and Mary Ellen Strom; Jerri Allyn, artist and director of education at the Bronx Museum; Charlotte Cohen, director of New York City Department of Cultural Affairs' percent-for-art program; Michelle Cohen, program director of New York City Board of Education's Public Art for Public Schools; Patricia Phillips, writer, critic, and dean of fine and performing arts, SUNY at New Paltz; Anne Pasternak, director of Creative Time; and Cesar Trasobares, artist and former director of the Metro Dade Public Art in Public Places program.*

*Three readings sent to the participants ahead of time served as a starting point for discussion: "Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Power: An Interview with Henry A. Giroux" by David Trend in *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992), "The New Social Sculpture" by Eleanor Heartney in *Critical Condition: American Artists and Their Critics* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1994), and "The Kudzu Effect (or: The Rise of a New Academy)" by Joyce Kozloff in *Public Art Review*, Issue 15, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Fall/Winter 1996). The following article represents a sampling of the discussion.*

## I. PUBLIC SCHOOLS

**A**LYSON POU: EDUCATION CAN BE DEFINED IN BROAD TERMS. ANYTIME WE ENGAGE IN sharing or imparting information we are engaged in the process of education. I see education as a two-way street. Knowledge is produced rather than received. However, this point of view is not necessarily shared by the education system.

What is the real purpose of the education system in this country? Is it to liberate the mind, to give individuals the tools and knowledge to make better lives for themselves? Or is it to turn out workers who will conform to the class roles and jobs for which they are most useful within a profit-driven economy?

Henry Giroux says in *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education*: "We need to make a link between schooling and the reconstruction of public life, defining schools as a democratic public sphere." He proposes that we reintroduce democracy as a radical social practice into our schools. In other words, a process that recognizes the need for continual reevaluation—"one which embraces and values difference." He also suggests alliances between educators and other cultural workers: "We need to enlarge the possibility for other groups to see schools as political sites where they can make a contribution." This is where I see public art practices and the education system intersecting in an interesting, challenging way: where we as artists and cultural workers can help create borderlands for dialogue and democratic struggle. Do you think the education system is a place where the public art process can be useful and meaningful?

**Jerri Allyn:** I was struck by this interview with Henry Giroux. He posits a framework of engaged education. Still, there are very few education-related sites

(left) Alyson Pou, *Under The Hunter's Moon*, detail, Bronx, N.Y., 1996.

Photo by the artist

(inset left) *Under the Hunter's Moon*, installation, 1996.

Photo by the artist

(inset middle) Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel, *Mnemonics*, 1992, Stuyvesant High School, N.Y.

Photo courtesy the artists

(inset right) Kabuya Bowens, *A World of Shapes*, P.S. 226 Bronx, N.Y., 1995.

Photo courtesy Public Art for Public Schools, New York



Alyson Pou, *Under The Hunter's Moon*, 1996.

Photo by the artist

in this country where we are allowed to grapple with issues in a democratic way. Our job as educators is to encourage a whole spectrum of critical thinking; it is constantly dampened from the bureaucracy down. We have a shocking dinosaur bureaucracy in the school system. It is amazing students learn anything. Educators are forced to work in underground ways instead of stating openly that we are engaged in a democratic process. But interventions do happen. I was able to facilitate a three-month-long project with Alyson Pou [*Under the Hunter's Moon* (1996), sponsored by the Bronx Museum] to work with two fourth-grade classes from a local school in the Bronx. She developed an art-science curriculum and completed an installation project in the museum with the students based on the ecology of a local park.

**Cesar Trasobares:** There is an assumption that the art teacher is somehow working toward the same goals as the public art administrator and practitioner. In Dade County we found that of the 450 art teachers in the system, about 300 of them had been on the job fifteen to twenty years and were still doing potato prints and finger painting. So as part of the state of Florida's teacher recertification program, we introduced a course in the public art process. It dealt with legislation, language, and philosophy, and with teaching the teachers how to take up public art as a subject itself.

Who is educating the teacher? What universities have courses in public art? Very little is taught about art as an activist activity, art as a conceptual force in the culture, and the role teachers can play in contributing to this dialogue.

**Pepon Osorio:** In my experience, there are two models for artists working in the public schools. In the first model the artist is allowed to come into a school and create work on his or her own terms. Then there is the other model in which the artist becomes a teacher. You are given the title of artist, but you are really just there to produce something every forty minutes for the system. The first way—really allowing the artist to be an artist—requires trusting and valuing what that person might do. The problem is the bureaucracy dictates what they want, and you end up doing that for forty minutes, five days a week.

**Peggy Diggs:** Two things have worked for me when I do projects in public schools. One is to come up with my own funding—then surprisingly administrators are not threatened by as many issues as you might think. The other thing is that I have devised a system of treating the students as my clients. I am there to start a conversation about issues that are important to them, and while we talk I take a lot of notes. Then I come up with visuals using their ideas and language and take those back to them and ask, "Is this what I hear you saying?" So I spend most of my time brainstorming about the issues. The downside is they don't get their "hands in the goo." The upside is they do get to feel a sense of empowerment because someone is taking their ideas seriously, and they get to say, "Yes, that works. No, that doesn't work." Then I listen, go away, and bring back new stuff. They see themselves reflected in something that wasn't done by them. There is a benefit to that, and it is also a way to cope with the limited amount of time we have to work together.

## II. YOUTH EXPRESSION

**Alyson Pou:** How can we help create frameworks in which people are able to develop their own cultural practice in their own way? Defining today's public art in her article, "The New Social Sculpture," Eleanor Heartney remarks that, "one might do worse than Joseph Beuys' 'social sculpture,' for although it may not necessarily take the form Beuys anticipated, this new public art does seem to respond to the Beuysian call for an art that 'releases energy in people, leading them to a general discussion of actual problems...[which] would mean the cultivation of relations between men, almost an act of life.'" This approach to art-making can encompass a lot of different kinds of work. Whether we are

creating an installation that will always remain part of a building, like Andrew Ginzel and Kristin Jones' *Mnemonics*, 1992, or are facilitating a temporary art action, like Julia Meltzer and Amanda Ramos' *Conversation Piece* [1996], we are pursuing our work in the spirit that was so clearly stated by Beuys.

**Sheila de Bretteville:** The thing most strongly etched in my mind is a pattern of answering, listening, and reflecting that is part of the pedagogy I learned from being a "red diaper baby." In other words, I learned the process of asking in order to find out who the other person is and where he or she comes from, which helps establish a notion of his or her agency as equal to yours, whatever age he or she is, whatever background.

It is not for me to tell students to be activists. What I can do is provide an environment in which being confrontational or being oppositional is one choice. Being the one who does the asking and reflecting is another choice. There are many ways of being in the world as a maker. At Yale we have a graphic design course called Community Action in which students locate issues they share with another community so they can find out what other people are doing and feeling and construct a making that responds to both. A collective called Class Action has arisen from this course.

(below) *School's OUT: The Naming Project*, photo of Prudence Browne, Diana Casillas, Jason Newland, 1994.  
Photo by Paul Taylor



Mary Ellen Strom,  
*School's OUT: The Naming Project*,  
photo of Diana Casillas, 1994.  
Photo by Barbara Bickart

The collective locates issues that are powerful to them and creates actions responding to those issues. For example, a domestic violence billboard in the community, cards in local hospitals, and a pro-choice billboard before the march on Washington. I am not in charge of it. It goes on by itself.

**Mary Ellen Strom:** Since 1991 I have directed a program called *School's OUT: The Naming Project*, which is by and about lesbian and gay youth. The program originates in New York City and has nine core members at all times. A goal of *School's OUT* has always been that the program be youth run. They now travel around the country leading workshops for other young people in different cities.

To begin the project, I worked with Dance Theatre Workshop's Public Imagination Program and the Youth Enrichment Services Program (YES) at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center. Some of



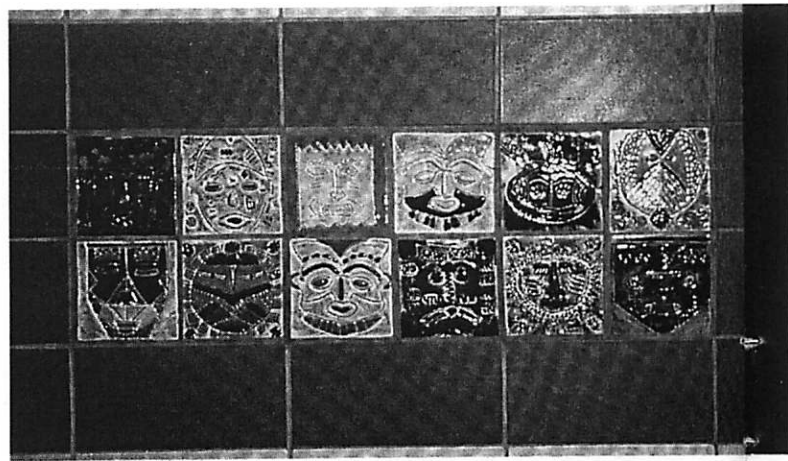
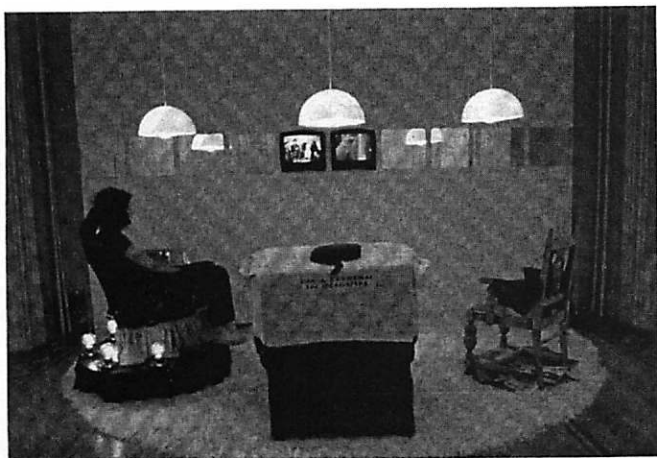
the young people were homeless, some had AIDS; they were fourteen to nineteen years old. These young people made a commitment to be in a project that was about art-making and group process. Barbara Bickart and Bridget Hughes were the codirectors of YES. The first thing Barbara Bickart told me was, "The most important thing you can do is be consistent. The second most important thing is time." We met once a week for four to five hours, and the young people showed up.

I let them lead the project. The young people have helped form other School's OUT groups in Miami, Houston, Boston, and Manchester, England and keep in touch with these groups. They now, for the most part, run the group themselves and are interested in fundraising, which is an important source of power for them. Some young people come to the program with their identities diminished, and in this program they are able to affirm their identities. That experience could possibly shift a life.

**Alyson Pou:** A lot of the success of this project has to do with Mary Ellen marshaling her resources and making a decision to back a group of people to find their voice and express it. Also, she made the commitment to do it over a long enough period so they have all the experimentation, make all the mistakes, and have all the success that many of us have been privileged to have in our own lives.

**Julia Meltzer:** Another example of that is the project, *Conversation Piece*, which happened in January 1996. Amanda Ramos and I worked with Unity House and the Hederick Martin Institute. Groups of youth in Troy and New York City exchanged video letters every week from January through April with the idea that we would see what evolved, what connections

Julia Meltzer, *Conversation Piece*, installation view, Safety Zone and Bent TV, 1996.  
Photo courtesy the artist



Steve Mayo, *Masks*, 1996.  
I.S. 246, Brooklyn, N.Y.  
Photo courtesy Public Art for Public Schools, New York

and alliances emerged. From those videos we developed an editing process and two installations—one at the New Museum in New York, and one at Rensselaer County Council for the Arts in upstate New York.

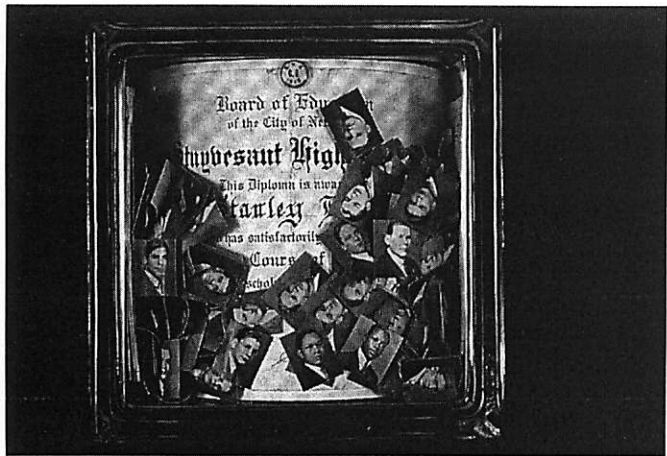
**Amanda Ramos:** Julia approached me when the video letters were in progress. We wanted to create an installation about the exchange and include more intensively a group of six teenagers. The installation materialized as a circle of carpet that was cut in half. One piece was installed in the New Museum and the other piece in Troy, and each half circle held three chairs oriented toward a wall on which there were two TV monitors with edited versions of the conversations.

One of the challenges was dealing with a group that was not consistent. We often walked around Astor Place for hours looking for them. Their lives are filled with drama and crisis. In the end, being able to mediate their problems and at the same time produce a piece that was complete and satisfying to them and to us were our greatest concerns.

### III. STEREOTYPES

**Alyson Pou:** Does it matter that public art projects involving young people often take forms like bus placards, tiles, and murals? Joyce Kozloff's essay, "The Kudzu Effect (or: The Rise of a New Academy)," describes ten stereotypical formulas for public art projects involving youth and suggests that artists may be falling into clichés and stereotypes rather than thinking freshly about each new project. Is current public art that involves an education component for young people following predictable models?

**Patricia Phillips:** I am deeply concerned about the packaging of public art and about how policies, procedures, protocols, and, in fact, some of the new



Kristin Jones and Andrew Ginzel,  
*Mnemonics*, 1992,  
Stuyvesant High School, N.Y.  
Photo courtesy the artists

programs in the academy are producing a kind of extrusion model of public art.

**Michelle Cohen:** However, a tile project can really work. Smaller increments contribute to the larger as a semester progresses. As the program director of the public art program for the New York City board of education, my job has been all about public art and education for the past eight years. There are actually good precedents in the schools that we should not abandon. Sometimes a traditional approach to public art in a large bureaucracy, where you deal with a building, users, issues of permanency, and maintenance, is best. A practical mural in ceramic or tile can be very effective. One should put credence in things that are permanent and durable when thinking about affecting students in a school over a long period of time.

I had the opportunity to start a program called Sites for Students, in which money that would normally go into construction would also be used in art education. This meant that artists could have long-term residencies in schools over the course of a year. The Sites for Students program was really a leap, because it invests capital dollars in art education, not just something physical and permanent. The emphasis is on the process. These residencies have resulted in what Joyce Kozloff might deride as predictable public art. We have ceramic tiles, mosaics, paving patterns—but they work, because they allow for multiple voices. They create an immediate validation of children's expression. Subsequent children recognize the work of past children and see that it is important, and it encourages them to want to create their own visual expression.

**Jerri Allyn:** I had a mixed response to Joyce's article. Arts and education projects have become more and more sophisticated over the past twenty-five

years. Yes, some things are done over and over, but new forms have also come out of this repetition that deserve a chance to be developed more fully and grappled with on a historical and critical level.

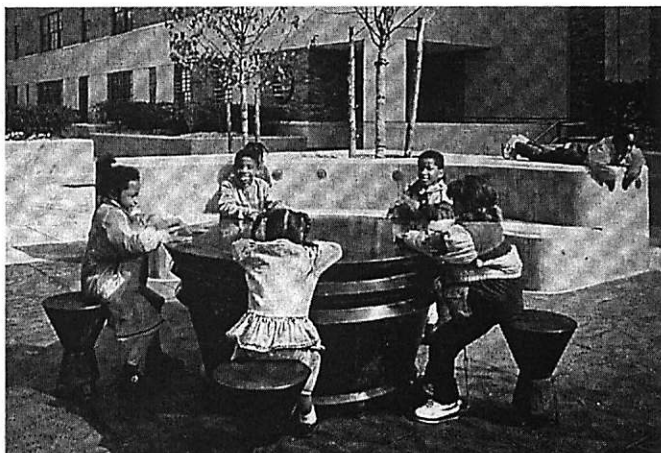
**Anne Pasternak:** There are grains of truth in Joyce's article, but it does not leave room for the actual experiences people have with those kinds of processes.

**Alyson Pou:** This is a good moment to hear from Andrew about the project he did in a local school with Kristin Jones.

**Andrew Ginzel:** The work, *Mnemonics*, 1992, was conceived for Stuyvesant High School. We were brought into the project early on and began by going to the existing school, which had been on Fifteenth Street for eighty-eight years. We attended school plays, visited classes, explored the building. As time came for the school to move to its new facility, we realized the old building had an incredible history, and that people were very sad about leaving it. It was like a museum of nineteenth-century science education.

We wanted to incorporate both the school's legacy and the sense that the school had changed. It is now primarily Asian, but at one time it had been primarily Jewish, then Irish, changing as various waves of immigrant groups came to New York. We wanted to reflect this history into the future, so we created eighty-eight empty reliquaries out of glass blocks, one of which was to be filled for the next eighty-eight years by each graduating class. For example, the major event of the year for the first class was the bombing of the World Trade Center across the street. Because that event had such an impact on the neighborhood, class members, on their own initiative, wrote to the FBI and

Bill and Mary Buchen,  
*Sound Playground*, P.S.23, N.Y.  
Photo courtesy Public Art for  
Public Schools, New York.



asked them for a piece of evidence from ground zero and were given one. Since then each graduating class takes on this reliquary project without any intervention from us or the school administration.

Another component of the project has to do with changing the old didactic model of education in the school. We installed artifacts and pieces from the rest of the world that would peak the students' interest, whether it was water from the Nile or the Yellow River or a rock from the Arctic or the top of Mt. Fuji. There are shreds of pipe tobacco found in the city over a two-hundred-year period. A lot of enigmas. So perhaps a student would have his or her locker next to one of these things for three years and wonder the whole time what it was. Or maybe another student would attend gym class three years running, bothered by something way up in the corner. What is that thing up there? Eventually these students go the library and solve the mystery. In a sense we have created a project that one would need at least four years to see.

**Jerri Allyn:** Is there a curriculum that the teachers use in relation to these glass blocks? How do students find out about the contents of the blocks?

**Andrew Ginzel:** There are volumes in the library that document each block, and there are cer-

tain clues or messages sandblasted onto the exterior of the boxes. They are meant to rouse people's curiosity.

**Michelle Cohen:** It often happens that artists have an ongoing relationship with a project and school. Bill and Mary Buchen did two commissions for us that are interactive. One, in the South Bronx, is called a sound playground. It consists of a drum table, drum seats, an echo chamber—a lot of interactive components with which kids play with sound. The Buchens still go regularly to the school and do workshops with the teachers and kids; they maintain an ongoing relationship.

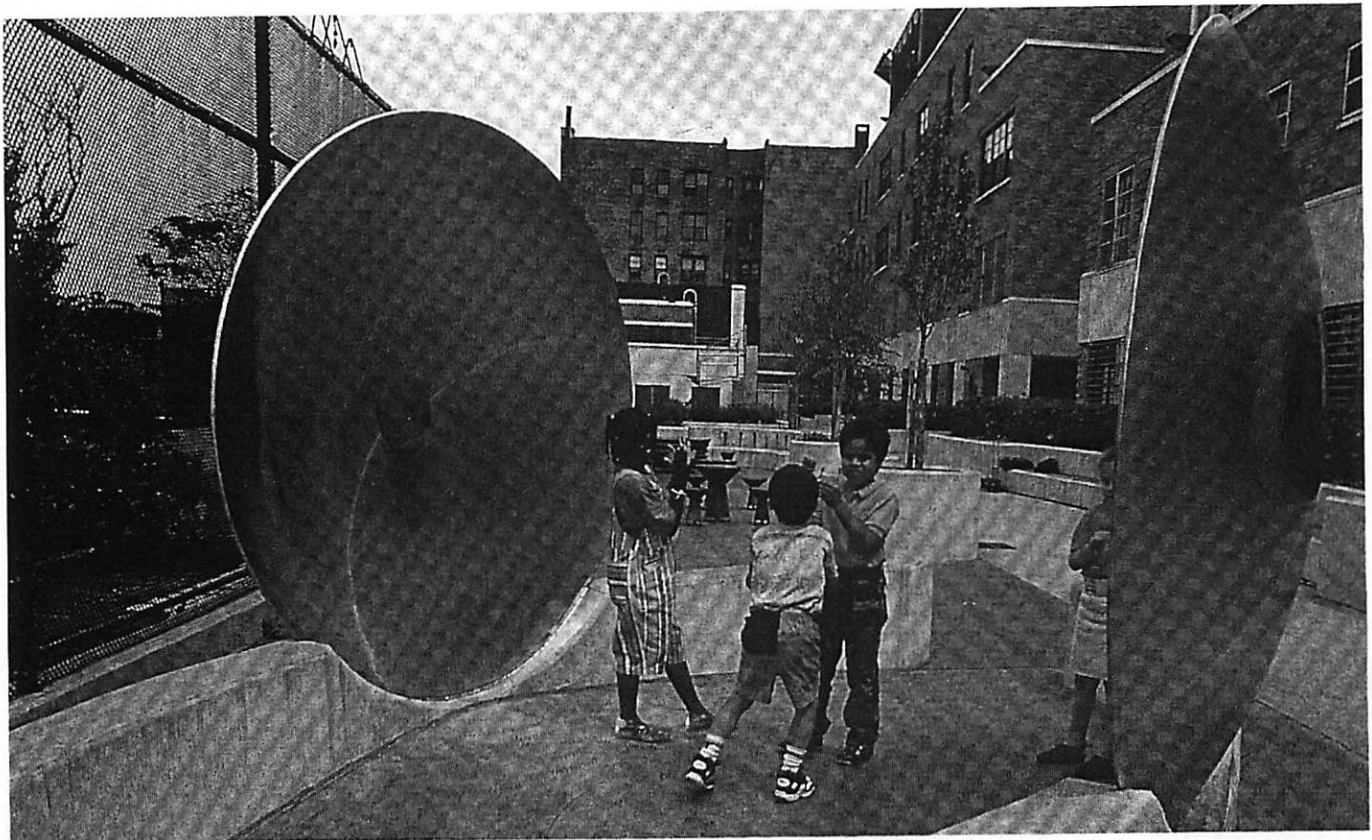
**Anne Pasternak:** Are they paid to continue this relationship?

**Michelle Cohen:** No, they elect to do it, although they have had outside funding to expand their initial projects. In fact, one of their projects is now the basis of a curriculum guide about sound.

#### IV. FUNDING

**Alyson Pou:** Because the Buchens elect to go in every year and continue that process is laudable, but I do think it highlights the age-old problem of artists being paid for what they do. What happens with a lot of education projects—with other kinds of public art projects as well—is that sometimes they take fifteen to twenty years to realize. Well, the artist is not going to see very much money for all the time and effort put into the

Bill and Mary Buchen, *Sound Playground*, P.S. 23, N.Y.  
Photo courtesy Public Art for Public Schools, New York



project. What are some of the issues you've run into regarding the funding of education projects?

**Jerri Allyn:** The result of the Annenberg Initiative, which poured \$12 million into arts education, is nonetheless mixed, which illustrates one issue. The mission talks about restructuring schools and developing dynamic places of learning that reintegrate art within the curriculum. A weird downside of the Annenberg Initiative, however, is that in the last fifteen years most art teachers have been cut from their positions. In many situations in which nonprofits have received money to collaborate with schools, we are training the nonart teachers to integrate art. The Bronx Museum has been piloting a project for three years with a local high school, and it has now been approved by the board of education as an official course for training teachers in integrating the arts into their curriculum using both aesthetic and studio work. So there is this opportunity to introduce diverse and interesting subject matter, but it makes me uneasy that artists actually do not play a role in this process, except perhaps as educators to transmit their knowledge to teachers who often are not excited about them being there in the first place.

**Anne Pasternak:** So much of today's public art is about what happens as part of the process of putting the project together. How do you communicate to funders the processes and the experiences that are as or more compelling than the end product itself?

**Sheila de Bretteville:** For those who give money for public art, I think it makes sense to include a component in the funding structure that involves community work, because if you don't, you end up having artists working without getting paid or working without it being part of the fee structure. If you don't have components for research or community involvement, then you don't honor or value those activities. The projects I apply for are ones that involve history and community. It doesn't make sense to have the same funding structure for artists who don't do that kind of work and for those who do. It's not such a big stretch—the Metropolitan Transit Authority has already put research and community work into their funding structure.

**Cesar Trasobares:** These things should be included in every legislation, as well as the administrative orders that lead to the interpretation of a program and define the parameters that are written into a contract with an artist. We need more input from artists so that art as a broader force in society can be factored in from the top down.

**Michelle Cohen:** Because funding comes from a capital plan, and the capital plan is meant

to build an infrastructure, we have to end up with a physical product. The projects we have done in schools all have had capital funding. What I tried to do with the Sites program is carve out a huge component to support arts education—literally pay artists to teach over the course of a year or a year and a half.

**Charlotte Cohen:** Cesar, you mentioned that decisions and money come from the top down, but we work with a community that absolutely wants artists' involvement and a dialogue to be part of the process.

**Pepon Osorio:** As an artist I am not sure I want to go into a community with a charitable approach "to help this community out." I am more interested in creating a long-term relationship with the communities in which I work. When the big money comes in from foundations, I think, "Oh great. I have money to start." But I also want to create a relationship in which I can go to the community and say, "Do you have money to help start this project," and work with them so that nothing will stop me if the money does not come from above. For my next piece, I am going to do an intervention, get into a storefront. I am going to establish a relationship with people so they know this work is not existing out of the ether. It wasn't made for free. I won't charge admission, but I will allow people to contribute in many ways.

**Alyson Pou:** Pepon is stepping outside the structure of the art community and broadening a dialogue. What you describe reminds me of my statement at the beginning of our discussion—that education takes place anytime we engage in sharing or imparting information. It is true for all of us that every idea we have put into action, every achievement we can be proud of, everything we have ever been able to accomplish is the result of the relationships we have made with others. The democratic process cannot be handed down as tradition. It has to be practiced and learned with each new generation. It is what allows us to disagree and develop individual thinking with integrity. It embraces difference. It also allows us to come together to make alliances—and so in the end it is what allows for an exciting creative process. Art is not the product of isolation. The ideas and projects we have talked about today are a lively indication that public art and the education process can create a context in which youth and age, speaking and listening are equally valued, thereby empowering us all.

Alyson Pou is a visual and performance artist and was director of public relations and programming for Creative Time, New York, for twelve years.