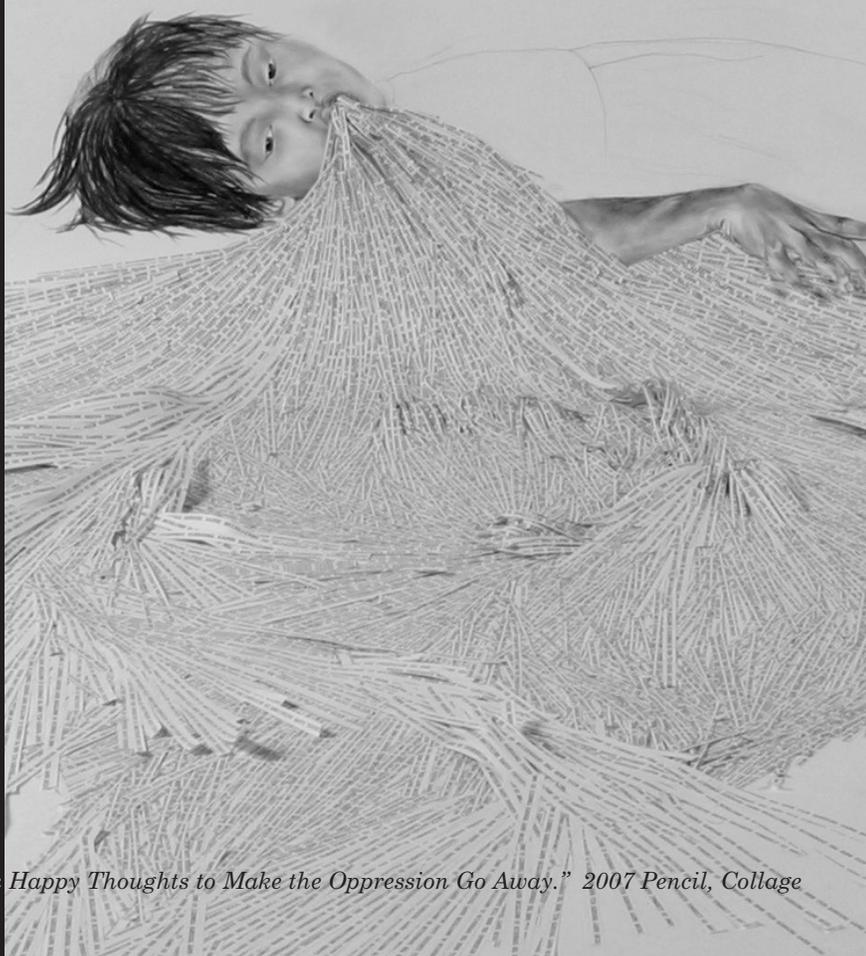


# The Dialogical Art of Community Arts

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*Artist: Oasa Du Verney, "Think Happy Thoughts to Make the Oppression Go Away." 2007 Pencil, Collage*

What is community art? It is what happens when an artist leaves her studio to engage collaboratively with others to promote social change. The most important byproduct of this process is to create meaningful and direct communication between groups and individuals. One way the community artist does this is to disrupt the patterns of people's everyday lives, creating places in everyday spaces where conversation can begin. Sometimes this requires a spectacle. Examples: Two artists sitting in an ATM lobby serving tea and offering conversation and an artist painting banners in a community garden lot in Southwest Baltimore. By creating dialogue there is a greater chance for connecting with each other's humanity, building understanding and creating a focus on inclusive problem solving.

In everyday life, the community artist must begin conversation and listen in places where people are not often heard. The art is not necessarily an object, but the beginning of the conversation. There is potential between all people to have a dialogue, but in our daily lives too often these potential moments are overlooked, lost, forgotten or hidden in the pace of working and living, trying to get by.

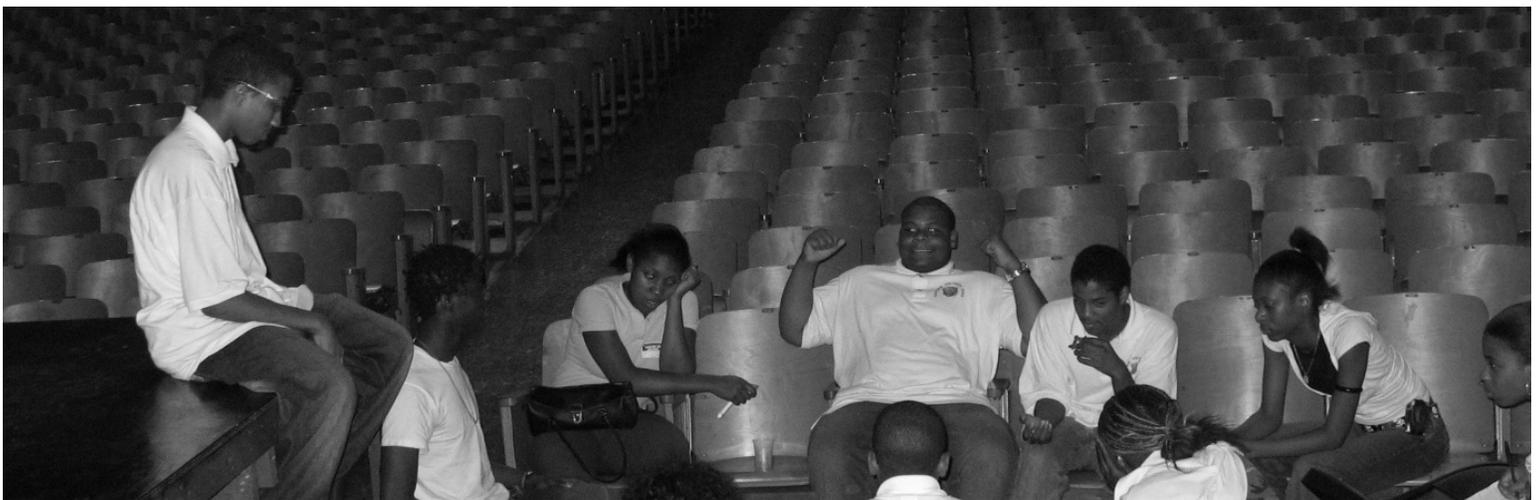
Conversation is important because it is the only means we have of getting to know one another, removing the barriers between ourselves, bridging the gap created by societal structures, individual prejudices and rules of etiquette. It is these connections that make life worth living. They are sometimes found in family and in community, but often they are not. Especially in a world where technological advances are making it easier to communicate without actually speaking with someone, how can we ensure that we will not completely lose human contact? Community art is one way of encouraging that contact.

Does this mean that anyone who carries on a conversation with a stranger is a community artist? Or is it something more, does the conversation have to delve deeper than small talk? One of the young men I work with has asked me several times what it means when people say, "Hello, how are you?" Do they really care or is it just a formality? He becomes frustrated when people ask him and he feels that they do not want to hear it if he tells them that things are not going well. If people are conditioned to ask this question as a reflex, then answers also become reflexive. So the community artist must find ways around these evasions of dialogue by asking real questions and listening to the answers.

One way for a community artist to do this is through teaching. Libratory education is based on questioning and gives young people the opportunity to practice observing, and interpreting their environment. By allowing students to find their voice and giving them a space to exercise it in the classroom, the teacher becomes facilitator and empowers young people to be open and assertive in beginning a dialogue about why things are the way they are in the world. One example of this is in using Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)<sup>1</sup>, where looking at works of art enables young people to make observations, share the way they see things and think critically about the meaning of the art.

Dialogue is also critical to understanding race, class, gender and all other forms of discrimination. The walls built by society around difference cause miscommunication. For example: a young Caribbean

<sup>1</sup> VTS is a teaching method that uses art to teach critical thinking skills. It is an open-ended and student-centered discussion where a series of questions are asked. The answer is paraphrased as a way to validate each participant's ideas, make sure everyone is heard and improve language skills.



*Kids with a Statement of Child First Authority at Carver Votek High School. Photo: Desiree Duell*

artist I know drew her children with slips of paper streaming from their mouths that read, "Think happy thoughts to make the oppression go away. Think happy thoughts to make it go away." If part of our society experiences a particular oppression and the other does not, this perspective is often invisible to the oppressor. But what happens when the privileged asks the oppressed, "how are you doing?" And what happens if the oppressed answers truthfully? These barriers to understanding between us begin to soften. This is one of the reasons that dialogue is necessary; so we can begin to understand the different places that we come from and to dismantle societal walls.

**A**s we attempt to understand each other there is a problem of finding a common language, however. Even when speaking the same language, it is possible to misunderstand. To fully understand another it is often necessary to have similar experiences. A certain amount of information is necessary to even begin questioning. Where can this information be found about the other? Community

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art's emphasis on questioning is one way to do this. Of course we will never have the experience of another, but we can begin to understand or at least know that we may never exactly understand if we question that person about their point of view.

Institutions often reinforce the lack of communication between people. When working in higher education people asked questions of me, but they were always the same questions: Where is the bathroom? How much do photocopies cost? Is this class full? Too often, the institutions were so confusing, everything that needed to be done by a student required a different signature and office to go to that it is no wonder there was no room for questions outside of the immediate. Questions that were based on our common humanity were almost always overlooked. Of course, on occasion, due to certain students returning to my office, some more meaningful relationships were formed, but even these were precariously balanced on the precipice of getting my work done or really beginning to connect to people. In a society that values productivity, work generally wins priority. It is now as a community artist that I understand that our success as a society is based on our ability to understand each other and work collaboratively and that I must not let myself get swept along with the pace of an institution.

Institutions and systems also can prohibit people from

speaking truthfully and directly for fear of losing one's job or position. And very often I have found that the confusion of the institution, leads to feelings of resentment between the people within them. These feelings are then focused on each other instead of the circumstances, which allows the circumstances to continue without a solution. This questioning is essential to communication and is at the core of creating larger systemic change.

**C**ommunity art offers a model for how we could change our approach to communication. This is a model where communication is not just about information, but also about forming relationships and creating understanding. In the Master's of Community Arts Program at MICA we attempt to model community art principals. In class conflicts are not avoided, rather all involved are expected to participate in the dialogue and listen to what students and faculty alike have to say. Acknowledgement is made about the different forms of privilege and power at work

while examining why and how we have gotten to a place of conflict or tension.

Bringing a group of people together to share in the decision-making process is often hard work because too many of us have never had the experience. For the most part, educational institutions teach us to stay quiet. Part of the role of the community artist is to help begin this dialogue by setting up circumstances in which a dialogue can be begun, in which everyone's voice can be heard. Artists like WochenKlausur orchestrate conversations as a means of social intervention. In a 1994 project WochenKlausur established a shelter for drug-addicted prostitutes in Zurich by facilitating dialogues on a boat between experts on drug issues, politicians, journalists and others. It was through their dialogue that they were able to problem-solve and establish the shelter.

In this way of thinking about community art as a way to create dialogue, the art object is not always necessary. It is meaningful social interaction that is the means and the end. And it is these interactions that will foster social change. Once we have a clearer idea of what people different from ourselves have experienced, we will be able to identify the societal structures that divide us. What makes life so beautiful is that there are so many different ways to look at it. If we are able to share the way we see it with others that in turn share their view, what more is necessary?