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Book Review: Arts for Change

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BOOK REVIEWS



Heather Pleasants,
Book Review Editor

Beverly Naidus. *Arts for Change*. Oakland, CA: New Village Press. 256 pp., \$14.95 (paperback)

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Given the longstanding relationship between the arts and social change, one might approach Beverly Naidus' *Arts for Change* with a wary eye. However, the book is a refreshing surprise and a welcome addition to the literature on socially engaged teaching practices. Naidus does an excellent job of drawing in all kinds of readers by weaving story and academic reflection together as opposing yet familiar textures. The overall effect is a powerful account in which theory develops through history, personal story, and the words of others, making *Arts for Change* an enlightening read.

Naidus first uses personal narrative to introduce the reader to her own story and set the stage for the pages that follow; she lays further groundwork for the book by providing the reader with a brief historical account of the arts – from cave paintings through FDR's Works Progress Administration on to McCarthy era propaganda and into the Cold War Abstract Expressionism. Building on this history, within the first few chapters, Naidus illustrates how the arts have been used for and against humanity for eons, and have sometimes been successful in changing opinion and rallying people to fight for their beliefs. Her discussion of the artwork associated with these events places emphasis on the social, historical and cultural contexts that shape and are shaped by art, and illustrates that art is not just for the elite or those who have plenty of leisure time. This is key, given that a decontextualized reframing of these art objects' meanings can make it difficult for students to understand why particular objects hold a significant status in world history.

Naidus moves from a broad historical perspective back to her own personal history in discussing how she has developed her pedagogy through life experiences and art training. The raw examination of her journey – from being an art major who at first did not understand the appeal of abstract expressionism, to achieving a satisfying balance between being an artist and a teacher – will be cathartic for many who have carved a similar path. Many who pursue the balance between art and teaching struggle with combining an artistic need to express, a socially responsible consciousness, and the desire to teach, and Naidus reveals how one teacher's gift of Ben Shahn's book *The Shape of Content* (1957) helped her realize that teaching was yet another extension of her creative self. The book, along with Naidus' involvement in public art works and feminist theorizing, moved her out of the "art for art's sake" mentality she had witnessed earlier in her career, while also showing her the uglier side of criticism and judgments made about art and the artists who create it.

Crafting a professional life as an artist is often quite difficult; Naidus' reflections on being rejected from three graduate schools will resonate with many artists who have sought formal training, gotten rejected, and then have had to sit back and ask "why?" Readers may also relate to Naidus' articulation of the tension between wanting to redefine art as she saw fit, and the realization that she had to discover a way to make her own way in the world. Naidus' chronicle of her move to New York, where she worked odd jobs and created art in her cockroach-infested apartment, further reflects struggles that many artists have endured. Through these accounts a sense of shared camaraderie allows readers to empathize with the challenges of becoming a teacher of art while maintaining and developing one's identity as an artist.

In discussing issues of pedagogy in Chapter

3, Naidus recalls the teacher we probably all experienced at some time, the one who thought mimeographed sheets of holiday images were to be considered “art.” Her hope for an art specialist trained as an “artist/teacher/activist/community member” is probably less likely to be found, but Naidus offers examples of promising sites for the development of such specialists that are on the horizon. Groups such as the Caucus for Social Theory in Art Education, Visual Culture, and Critical Theory are beginning to permeate schools of art and art education and are encouraging artists and art educators to be aware of art’s wider implications. Naidus suggests that this progressive school of thought may help others develop school curricula that are interdisciplinary, and she advocates for an approach to art that emphasizes creativity within civic engagement and the role of the arts in promoting an ethic of caring. Often, positive influences on Naidus’ pedagogy have taken shape through informal interactions and practices, such as late night debates with fellow artists, reflections on world politics, journaling, and personal reflections. Though these experiences take place outside of formal education, Naidus finds them integral to informing her identity as an artist and educator and to her development of transformative pedagogical practices.

Naidus devotes most of Chapter 4 to outlining her curriculum for the Arts in Community interdisciplinary program at the University of Washington, Tacoma. Through photographs and descriptions of activities and projects, Naidus presents vivid examples from her classes, where students create art in response to environmental issues, wartime concerns, body image questions, cultural identity, labor, and globalization. The chapter concludes with Naidus’ explanation of the challenges to developing this type of curriculum. Typical barriers such as grading, time limitations, dumbed down products of American schools, and the perennial lack of funding are all hurdles countless art teachers face around the country; and Naidus skillfully articulates strategies she has used to surmount these obstacles.

In panoramic perspective, Chapter 5 presents sketches of the work and experiences of artists and educators working for social change across academic and community contexts. These sketches emerged from a series of one-hour

interviews in which Naidus asked each individual to reflect on their practice and pedagogy and offer “stories of transformation.” Ironically, though Naidus frames the chapter as an opportunity for community building, learning, and dialogue, the sheer number of artist/educator profiles (each usually spanning about two pages) precludes a complete achievement of this goal. Rather, these brief glimpses into the work lives, challenges, and triumphs of this unique group of people often leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Given the book’s emphasis on transforming traditional arts teaching to socially engaging art and cultural production, this may very well have been one of Naidus’ objectives. Nevertheless, these short, but powerful representations of practice are inspirational narratives that begin to delineate the possibilities of socially engaged art instruction.

Naidus ends *Arts for Change* with an examination of her trips to Cuba and her observations about the artists who live and work there. She recognizes the contradiction of the art she saw there as expressionist, while still serving as a tool for what the government wanted people to know. From Cuba, Naidus moves on to consider conversations she had with a young college girl who expressed idealistic thoughts about the impact she could have on marketplace practices, her own observations about the monolithic American health-care profession, and finally a reflective examination of her own dream life. Naidus’ critique of the commercial marketplace and art’s role in it is present throughout the book, and it is within this last chapter that Naidus courageously looks inward as a way to figure out her small place in this very big picture.

Many artists claim to start life with a slightly different or quirky slant on things and Naidus is no exception. She recounts her life as “weird and different early on,” a life influenced by a scientifically grounded father, and by her recollections that she did not have the opportunity to experience indigenous cultures until later in her adulthood. After gaining this opportunity, another mentor persuaded her to paint her dreams and share them with others. The cultivation of her ability to look inward eventually led her to become part of a women’s dream group that uses dreams as a tool to strengthen their creative life. In the end, her metaphoric personal narratives

woven throughout the book are finally revealed as part of this analysis-of-dreams process.

As Naidus looks to herself, society, and others through *Arts for Change*, she is reminded of how often the answer to life's questions are located outside the frame, and that thinking outside the box and looking at things from a different perspective are metaphors for what she wants the reader to think about as they ponder their own creative battles, and look through the cracks for ways to serve the many rather than just a few. Through a multifaceted account that merges personal narrative, biography, history and the presentation of strong pedagogical practices, *Arts for Change* offers all of us an open invitation to become mindful of the unifying ability and eye-opening power of art.

Donoghue, E.M., and Sturtevant, V.E., Eds. *Forest Community Connections: Implications for Research, Management, and Governance*. Washington, DC: Resources for the Future Press, 2008. 280 pp. \$32.95 (hardbound).

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Within the last several decades, the management of the nation's public forests has increasingly shifted from an industrial extraction model toward a focus on ecosystem functions, restoration, and forest health. This evolution in forest policy and management has created more opportunities for community involvement in resource management and governance. *Forest Community Connections: Implications for Research, Management, and Governance* seeks to elucidate the consequences of this shift and examine factors contributing to strong community-forest connections.

Nineteen authors contribute 14 essays to the book, which is organized within three broad categories, examining how social science is used to define and assess communities; how persistent and emerging forest management issues affect communities; and how forest and community connections develop into unique forms of forest governance. The book is well organized according to these three areas and each essay is

relevant to the topic and contributes sensibly toward better understanding community-forest connections. Within the first chapter, the editors set the stage by exploring the evolution of forest policy and management from the Great Depression to the current struggle toward integrating communities and forests. Viewed in light of the sociocultural and biological history of our forested landscape, the current relationships between people and forests and forest policy are better understood. Subsequent essays examine issues such as the advantages of involving communities in collaborative research; the growing need to consider non-timber forest products in forest management; and the logic of creating community forests to avoid, among other ills, landscape parcelization.

Donoghue, Sturtevant, and their contributing authors submit that healthy communities and forests are dependent on flexible and dynamic community-forest connections. Socioeconomic, political, and institutional processes operate to either sustain or weaken forest communities. The recognition and the development of human capital within a community and the strengthening of internal and external communal ties are integral to its strength and resilience. Realizing this vision of resilient communities and healthy forests is not something that happens overnight. The path toward fostering strong community-forest connections requires citizen engagement over time and is fraught with several significant challenges. First, the nature of the community-forest connection is continually redefined through timber markets and technology, shifting sociodemographics and environmental values, and changing forest policy. Further, production of timber products in the U.S. has flat-lined while consumption has increased. Products such as furniture, the bread and butter of many communities, are being replaced by imports from China and elsewhere. Finally, the expanding urban fringe into forested areas and the increasing immigration of exurbanites presents new challenges to communities, forests, and forest managers. Finding ways to work with these challenges while taking meaningful steps toward the communal stewardship of our forests is at the heart of Donoghue and Sturtevant's message.

The authors illuminate the consequences of the shift from single-interest-based forest