

Service Learning and the Art Community



Bringing People Together Through Art

Vida Sabbaghi

Reaching out can be prompted by widely different motivations and proceed in multiple directions. Throughout this newsletter there are numerous stories of service learning and community building generated within the art classroom. Featured here is a different model – where involvement begins in the community and is used as the platform for students’ learning. Designer and curator Vida Sabbaghi, Director of COPE NYC, an interdisciplinary art program that uses innovation to bridge and assist communities, profiles her organization and its far-reaching activities. Following Ms. Sabbaghi’s article, there are two short narratives by college instructors whose students were involved in some of the exhibits profiled below.

At COPE NYC (Creative Opportunities Promoting Equality) we believe it is imperative for cultural arts institutions to come to neighborhoods and bring people of all backgrounds together in discovering their commonalities and their differences. COPE NYC integrates the art world domains by connecting commercial artists, student artists, art educators, gallery curators, and museums. On a macroscopic level, when COPE NYC connects the art world with academia and the community, something special transpires: the complex and dynamic moving parts come together to create a vibrant collaboration. Each one has an important place in our history, and connecting them brings about what educational theorist, Paulo Freire believed in: working together in a manner where there is a mutual respect for each person’s role; simultaneously, individuals’ and groups’ unique thumbprints are appreciated and respected within a new framework.

The mission of COPE NYC’s sustainable practices project at the historic Pfizer Building in downtown Brooklyn, NY, was to connect professionals in the arts with academia. COPE NYC hoped to forge opportunities for partnerships, networking, exhibiting, and community service by training college students

to facilitate sustainable practices workshops and tours of art exhibits. As the project’s layers unfolded it became a platform for service learning in many forms.

I began organizing and directing this multi-tiered art and design project at the former Pfizer Building in September 2016 after I worked out a plan with Acumen Capital Partners LLC to use large spaces in this building, which is becoming a hub of game changers and innovators such as Pratt Institute’s Brooklyn Fashion + Design Accelerator. Several BF+DA residents integrate fashion and sustainable practices on the same floor as the recently opened Pratt Institute MFA studios. This landmark building was a perfect fit for us because Acumen Capital Partners LLC has long supported green practices. Acumen provided us with an authentic stage to nurture our sustainable practices service learning project.

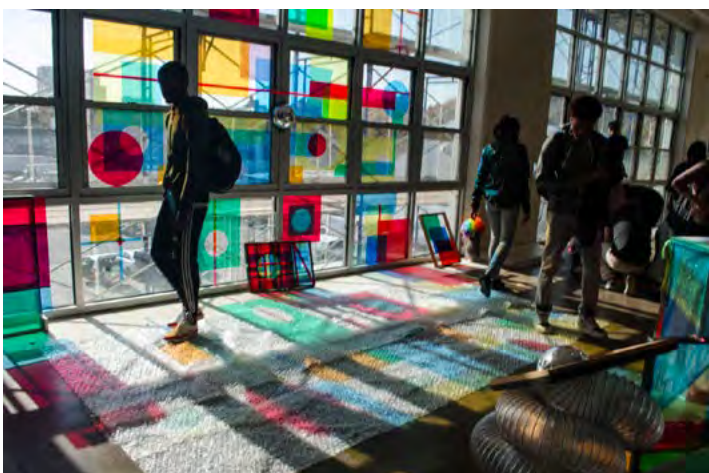
I wanted to afford students “a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students...seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves. In the process, students link personal and social

development with academic and cognitive development... experience understanding leads to more effective action.”¹

Service Learning

A service learning project for student/artists in residence, involved a small selected group of art and design students from Brooklyn College, Pratt Institute, Teachers College Columbia University, and Adelphi University, who, as artists in residence, had an opportunity to re-use discarded furniture and construction materials to create something functional for the community. Businesses residing in the building, Weaving Hand and Brooklyn Research, donated surplus materials for the artists in residence.

Pratt MFA students and alumni, a.k.a. #Brooklyn Makes: Felisa Adderley, Abby Cheney, Natalia Espinel, Sheila Lam, Chenchi Li, Susan Luss, Adam McGowan, Weiran Sun, Trevis True, Chia-Ying Wang, and Boris Ziu, and faculty advisor Jean Shin worked as a group with the building’s tenant, Brooklyn Research, who donated outdated technology and software. Acumen gave them access to the building’s excess materials such as security mirrors, industrial supplies, and an art pedestal. Material for the Arts, the premier NYC creative reuse center, provided them with an eclectic combination of items that ran the gamut from a cinematic movie wheel to translucent plastic panels, from picture frames to bubble wrap. They had the most fun transforming these materials into a freestanding interactive installation that included bubble wrap jumping mats. Along with their faculty advisor, Professor Jean Shin, who made this project part of their classwork, they made the residency area a playful community space, which became a big hit with hundreds of visitors of all ages. On the last day of their residency they could hardly wait to finish lunch and gather around the installation with Prof. Shin to review their work – smiles all around!



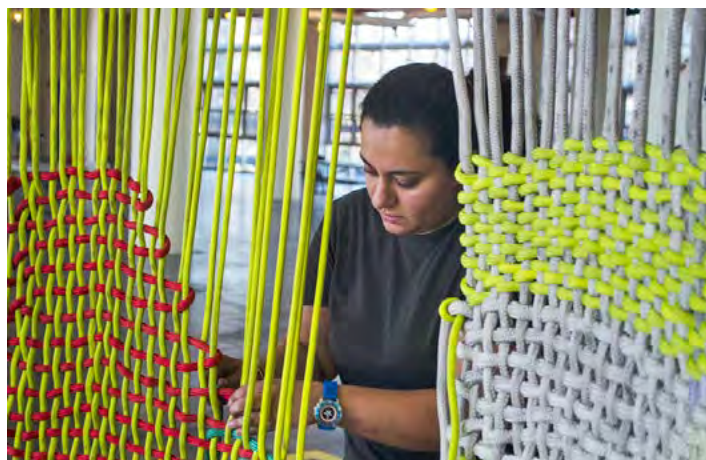
As the month long exhibit came to a close, the installation became part of a *toys for charities* event for thousands of children, hosted at Pfizer by a local police precinct. A visiting principal was amazed at the way his students were drawn to the Pratt #BrooklynMakes installation. The children explored every crevice, from the rainbow windows, which utilized the sun to reflect colors on the

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bubble wrap jumping mats, to the switches and gadgets, that activated colors, movements, and audio, and to the little boxed niche with lights where kids crawled in and out. The children literally extended the reach of the planned activities by thinking outside, and inside, the box as they figured out fun new ways to interact with the installation. They happily surprised us all. Even the adults began to get down on the floor and play with the gadgets.

Another successful example of this service learning project by the graduate students/artists in residence was a collaboration among Pratt students Natasha Seng, Jillian Leedy, and Hannah Calderwood, and Brooklyn Grange Farms, and Long Island City Farms. Brooklyn Grange told the students about their most pressing issue—bird and pigeon control during seed germination. The students’ research focused on creating a holistic interaction between the farmers, the gardens, and the pigeons to successfully germinate seeds. Their three goals were: 1 - to create a sustainable design to prevent birds from feeding on germinating seeds; 2 - to meet the design constraints of the farm environment - high winds, mobility, shallow soil, durability, and flexibility; 3 - and to utilize ‘collective intelligence’. The students were successful by helping to sustain the business of rooftop urban farming. They are considering turning their ideas into a Kickstarter venture. Jillian and Natasha went on to receive a college grant. The Pratt students also forged new relationships when they hosted University of Pittsburgh students for an overnight stay. Faculty and students initiated a dialogue about a future exhibit at University of Pittsburgh.

Weaving Hand – Healing Arts



Weaving Hand, a tenant in the Pfizer Building, was happy to participate with weaving workshops. They showed young children how to weave on a beautiful horizontal handmade loom. Pratt Art Education graduate students Melissa De Jesus, Gordieh Nasserri (pictured), and Carley Snack worked with Weaving Hand to create floor mats for the kids with donated materials. The seating orientation for the workshops was on the floor, and I was concerned it would be too cold for the kids to sit on. The graduate students solved the problem by weaving mats for November 16th workshops.



Commercial Artists in Residence

Alice Hope, Sui Park, and Chin Chih Yang are artists who utilize sustainable practices in their work. In order to encourage and influence evolving student artists to challenge accepted studio norms in material and process, COPE NYC formulated a program of shared space involving these established artists and students with emergent practice. COPE NYC realizes that student artists are not given many residency opportunities; we decided to try this experiential idea so they could learn from each other. We feel the need to give post-secondary students more opportunities and credit for their ability to take on new responsibilities.

Inviting work made from recycled materials

An open call for artwork was issued to college students, NYC public school students, and art educators for the planned exhibit *Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and the 4th R – Reimagine*. The submitted artwork which focused on the importance of sustainability through creative means, was exhibited on the third floor of the Pfizer Building along with the work of the artists in residence. The project was supported by the New York City Art Teachers Association/United Federation of Teachers. John Kaiser, Director of Education for *Materials for the Arts*, generously supported the project by donating materials for the artists in residence and the students who attended the workshops, and by providing MFTA teaching artists who facilitated creative reuse workshops.

REPSYCHLING

The third major installation of An Inclusive World's exhibit, *Repsychling*, a COPE NYC exhibit of work by artists who use humble materials in unusual ways, occupied a large post industrial space on the ground floor. Transformed by soft lighting, the space was filled with exciting art: Federico Uribe, Jean Shin, Will Kurtz, Jacques Jarrige, Aurora Robson, Mark Khaisman, Richard G. Driscoll, Sui Park, Anna K. Lemnitzer, Alice Hope, and, Stephen J. Shanabrook, whose bunnies made from melted plastic pharmaceutical bottles, became the graphic representation for the project. COPE NYC internships afforded students the opportunity to apprentice with *Repsychling* contributing artist, Chin Chih Yang, by assisting with his site specific art on the ground floor, and to network with both commercial and student artists in residence in the same space.

In another form of service learning, through the COPE NYC internship for this project, college students accepted responsibilities which included: photo and video documentation of COPE NYC art making workshops; assisting with the design and facilitation of workshops for youth, adult, and senior groups; supporting outreach, exhibition needs, and other events related to this project; creative reuse fashion photography – assisting with capturing processes of fashion making, posing, and performances involved in students' display of clothing they made; and capturing the play and performance with students' fashion wear, and photography devoted to displaying fashion items which are enhanced by backdrops, environments, and accessories.

On November 16th the former Pfizer Building became host to over 350 participants for more than twenty workshops supported by academics, museum educators, nonprofits, and local businesses. Art students from Teachers College Columbia University students and SUNY New Paltz art students, who were given information about the contributing artists in the *Repsychling* exhibit, connected their workshops to the exhibit's theme: using commonplace environmentally friendly materials to create wonders. Teachers College Art Education students prepared for the tours by learning how museum educators utilize Visual Thinking Strategies, an inquiry-based, rather than content-based, method of discussing art. We





brought a museum model to the community by activating massive empty spaces.

On November 19th, the day of the opening receptions of the *4th R - Reimagine*, workshops facilitated by University of Pittsburgh professors and students enriched the opening experience. The project became a local, statewide, and national community pedagogy involvement

The dual opening receptions took place on two floors: the *4th R - Reimagine* was on the third floor and *Repsychling* on the ground floor. The sustainability theme continued on the ground floor in a space with very high ceilings – a great venue for large artworks in *Repsychling*, some pieces as long as 35 feet. [5] A highlight was a performance by the high school students from the High School of Fashion Industries and Juan Morel Campos Secondary School in a Fashion Show with a Purpose. Two interns from Parsons worked with Juan Morel Campos applying their fashionista and adaptive reuse processes. Queens Museum, COPE NYC, and Weaving Hand worked with Juan Morel Campos students as they integrated the sustainable art fashion curriculum with their science classes.

The community turned out for the exhibits' openings. High school students delighted the crowd when they strutted their sustainable clothes in the midst of the large post industrial space filled with commercial artworks – a night for all to remember.

In the accompanying articles that follow, Dr. Beth Thomas (SUNY New Paltz) and Dr. A.A. Sieunarine (Brooklyn College) relate how this multi-tiered COPE NYC service learning community project, showcasing art made from recyclables, engaged their students through different perspectives.

¹Eyler, Janet S., and Giles, Dwight E., quoted by Joe Bandy in "What is Service Learning or Community Engagement?"
<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-through-community-engagement/>

Our thanks to photographers Xingy Li and Susan Luss

The Brooklyn Fashion + Design Accelerator is a new initiative launched by Pratt Institute that provides designers with the resources they need to transform their ideas into successful businesses. With over \$2,000,000 in initial funding pledged by Pratt Institute, the State of New York, New York City, and the borough of Brooklyn, the BF+DA brings high-potential fashion designers, industrial designers, and technologists together under one roof.

<https://bkaccelerator.com/join/>

Weaving Hand is an organization that embraces global weaving traditions, fosters working partnerships with an international community of weavers, and operates as a healing arts center. By engaging with artists from both historic weaving, traditional and contemporary fiber arts, Weaving Hand celebrates a fusion of ideas and techniques through travel, studio classes, workshops, outreach programs, and exhibitions.

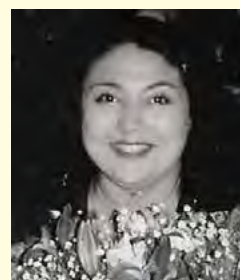
<http://www.weavinghand.com/>

Brooklyn Research was founded in 2012 as a co-research space for independent and privately funded researchers building new technology in Brooklyn, NY. The lab offers prototyping facilities and workspace to a limited number of full-time research members. Membership is granted to applicants with compelling proposals for research in a range of areas and disciplines such as data analytics and visualization, machine learning, computer vision, robotics, fabrication, and wearable / textile-based technology.

<http://brooklynresearch.org/>

Materials for the Arts is a program of the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, with support from the Departments of Sanitation and Education. MFTA collects a wide variety of reusable materials from businesses and individuals and make them available for free to nonprofits and civic organizations with arts programming and public schools. By providing a way for people to donate their unneeded supplies to thousands of creative and educational activities across the five boroughs, MFTA diverts over 1 million pounds of materials from the landfill each year.

<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dcla/mfta/html/home/home.shtm>



COPE NYC Founder and Director, Vida Sabbaghi is a curator, historian, designer, and educator with 15 years of experience in the arts. COPE NYC provides an innovative approach to promoting social relations through art and design, community art projects, exhibitions, conferences, and round table discussions; and works with senior citizens' centers, rehabilitation centers, K-12 public and private schools, and post-secondary schools.