

# Trusting Art

## *Mary Jane Jacob*

In 1990, New Museum’s Marcia Tucker, the curator of “art outside the mainstream,” opened *The Decade Show*. It was an effort she had spearheaded to right the canon of art history and respond to the now—a turbulent era of social decline in which artmaking took a social turn.<sup>1</sup> The 1980s had been marked by a conservative backlash, the effects of which remain present in American society, and which has more recently been emboldened under a president who (as it is said) “plays to his base.” *The Decade Show* took up a question at the core of American culture: *how can many peoples from many nations become one people and one nation?* This question lies at the heart of the ongoing struggle between conservatives and liberals: whether to maintain an illusory sameness or respect difference.

Looking back, Tucker states her mission to address those artists “invisible in the mainstream but who seemed to be really critical to an understanding of the period.”<sup>2</sup> Likewise her co-collaborators Kinshasha Conwill and Nilda Perez spoke of the need to be more inclusive, with Perez citing the historic exclusion of “parallel cultures” and the existence of “parallel aesthetics.” She concluded: “What we really are doing, what we really need to pursue is working towards the creation of a very generous and open art environment in this country, one that will allow and accept artists from all backgrounds, without stereotyping and pigeonholing.”<sup>3</sup>

The 1980s was also the era of the emergence of identity politics in art and the discourse of “the Other,” to borrow from theorist Homi Bhabha. It was a time when cultural history and present-day circumstances fused to become the subjects—the grist—of art. Curators Laura Trippi and Gary Sangster, in their fine analysis of critical theory and the times in the catalogue for this same exhibition, noted that artists’ work “aimed to unsettle the conviction that art exists in an autonomous sphere, free from economic and political interest.”<sup>4</sup> Art became political and more politicized than ever before in the

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1 See *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and The Studio Museum of Harlem, 1990. It is interesting to note that (ex)CHANGE artist Tomie Arai was included in this show.

2 Nilda Perez, Marcia Tucker, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, “Directors’ Introduction: A Conversation,” in *The Decade Show*, 9.

3 Ibid., 9-10.

4 Laura Trippi and Gary Sangster, “From Trivial Pursuit to the Art of the Deal: Art Making in the Eighties” in *The Decade Show*, 68.

United States because the numbers of artists and range of voices were far greater than at any other time.

Asian Arts Initiative (AAI) was born of this time and spirit, when the social dimensions of art were highly visible and the need to make change, the very feeling that one could make change—not just in the art world but also in the world—was part of the equation. Now we are at such a time again, twenty-five years later, with a need as great or greater. Does this mean those before were unsuccessful? Alas, as philosopher John Dewey teaches us, there is no end to the task “till experience itself comes to an end,” for “the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.”<sup>5</sup>

What anniversaries cause us to do—why anniversaries are, in fact, important—is to remember what the times were like. In 1993, as Bill Clinton was just coming into office, many were still suffering the effects of Reaganism that had vastly magnified the problem of homelessness; sought to set back civil rights, absolve abuses, and strip women of abortion rights; and turned a blind eye to the AIDS epidemic.<sup>6</sup> We saw the National Endowment of the Arts come under attack, with artists vilified as the conservative Right began its campaign by taking target practice at the arts, readying itself for bigger prey.

For my part, as a curator, it was the culminating year of eight sited, activist projects emanating from artists’ residences in communities around Chicago collectively titled *Culture in Action*. It was my reaction to the increasing commercialism of the art world and the exclusion of audiences unable to pay the price, so it marked my exodus from museums. Most of all it was an effort to address what the best artists of the times were about: change. Going out of the museum as well as art’s mainstream, this program also resulted in launching art world controversies around what is art, can artists authentically work with communities, can art make a difference, and can art play a role in society.<sup>7</sup>

One hundred years earlier, in 1893, Swami Vivekananda, representing Hinduism as a delegate to the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, gave a rousing speech well remembered in India and other parts of the world today. He sought to spread the word of tolerance and universal acceptance of all peoples. And demonstrating the value of empathy, he offered, as he put it, his own theory that unity will not come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others; “each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.”<sup>8</sup> After attending the conference, Dewey would write decades later to a xenophobic American population on the dawn of World War II: “to cooperate by giving differences a chance, to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one’s own life-experience, is inherent in the democratic personal way of life.”<sup>9</sup>

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5 John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” *John Dewey and the Promise of America*, Progressive Education Booklet No. 14 (Columbus, OH: American Education Press, 1939): 17. Also in *The Collected Works of John Dewey: Later Works Volume 14: 1939-1941, Essays*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

6 See my essay “Art in the Age of Reagan: 1980-1988” in *A Forest of Signs: Art in the Crisis of Representation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

7 See Joshua Decter, Helmut Draxler, et al., *Exhibition as Social Intervention: “Culture in Action”* (London: St. Martin’s Press, Afterall Books, Exhibition Histories series, 2014).

8 [https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/full-text-of-swami-vivekananda-s-chicago-speech-of-1893-117091101404\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/full-text-of-swami-vivekananda-s-chicago-speech-of-1893-117091101404_1.html).

9 Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” 16.

So anniversaries remind us, too, that we have been here before. Others before us have lived *our* problems. At the same time it is important that we sense them as new, live them anew in the present, because it is their aliveness that gives vitality to the job ahead. We all follow a same path. As poet Donald Hall wrote, “work, love, build a house, and die”—“but,” he emphatically added, “build a house.”<sup>10</sup>

Asian Arts Initiative is such a house. A house stands its ground, both creating and responding to the community around it, and in the house that is AAI, art models what a just society might look like. This is embodied, too, in the organization’s staff, which shares the value of equity and a belief that art is not so much a thing or a tool to achieve another goal but a way of being by which we enact our humanity. It is in such a moment as ours today, when we find a belief in what we do because of the values at stake, that community organizing has a natural and necessary place in an arts organization. It refreshes those charged with the task and revitalizes the community members involved and audiences touched. And with a project like *(ex)CHANGE*, the public art installations launched across Philadelphia as part of AAI’s 25th anniversary, it means trusting the process.

Working in communities is challenging. To keep a project alive and real is to come back to center with self-awareness and criticality, to recognize that communities are not static but ever evolving, changing. So we do not fix a problem once and forever, but return to it with continued vigilance. Back in the 90s, artist and writer Steve Durland reflected on the two-sided partnership that is community-based art practice, probing just why artists (and, we can add, arts professionals) give themselves to this taxing work, and why communities make themselves vulnerable by working with artists.<sup>11</sup> He concluded that they are both self-interested parties—and that’s a good thing—because each cares deeply about what they believe in.

I would add to Durland’s assessment that such work is dependent on artists and community members coming together with an open mind, the open space of not knowing, and then giving time to the process. The work begins with aims—an openness to what being together can mean and do—not pre-defining what the result will be. These aims, rooted in common values, go to the core of who each party is. And when they find this common ground, there is the possibility for an exchange.

*(ex)CHANGE* was such a moment of moments. It prodded further AAI’s longtime participation in making positive change on the level of home. For Boone Nguyen, to work in communities meant to practice respect for the traditions from which he comes yet move past nostalgia; for Rea Tajiri it was to surpass commemoration and create provocations and new awakenings; for Tomie Arai and the Chinatown Art Brigade (CAB) it required bringing forward groups of persons to find their voice; and for Sueyeun Juliette Lee, collaborating with Jungwoong Kim, it required a space in which they might embody pain and longing, then release it.

Boone Nguyen strives to de-center the notion of sympathy and catapult us to see community resilience and renewal: *we are still here*. He does so by probing the effects of a war that rocked the U.S. and ravaged Vietnam. He brings insight into this human



PHOTOGRAPHY BY CONSTANCE MENSH FOR ASIAN ARTS INITIATIVE

10 Donald Hall, *The One Day* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988).

11 Steven Durland, “Looking for Art in the Process,” in *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*, eds. Mary Jane Jacob and Michael Brenson (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1998): 146-149.

tragedy, not by showing us destruction but by allowing us to see that even in the face of desperate personal survival there is the collective need for cultural continuity. For *Leave, then there is no way home* he traveled between South Philadelphia and Vietnam, two communities the artist calls home, though neither is exactly that. He is fully aware that it is his educational and economic privilege that allows him to possess this mobility, even if his trip to Vietnam was facilitated through and motivated by family ties. In Philadelphia he finds a community thriving in a new home despite dislocation. Meanwhile Vietnamese villagers keep their location alive in spite of devastating loss, repurposing bomb craters and making the horrific into a living landscape. As witness to the life in each community, Nguyen finds the critical role of performing cultural and spiritual labor.

CAB's *Here to Stay* is a narrative both particular to Philadelphia and the youth population it engages and one that echoes experiences CAB member Tomie Arai has encountered before. People do not necessarily know how to tell their own narrative, and Arai understands this from personal experience. For her, communities are powerfully resonant places that speak more loudly than the art or academic worlds can. Though she believes change is possible and resistance is a necessary strategy, she nonetheless questions (as we all must): how can change happen when a community's very existence is perpetually threatened? Is resilience enough? Or might we begin to understand each other's experiences by coming to understand that our problems, our home, our place, and our needs are interconnected?

Such wider visions of the city allow us to inhabit other spaces, and in fact, *(ex)CHANGE* sought to do just that—to embody a “poetic reflection on the changing spaces of the city” and at the same time “the strength of community activism and place building.”<sup>12</sup> This series of works explored not only people in their places and but also the body in space. Both Rea Tajiri and Sueyeun Juliette Lee (partnering with Jungwoong Kim) employed the space of buildings to allow us to travel through time. With Tajiri's *Wataridori: Birds of Passage*, bicycles give form to a local story while serving as monument markers at each of several sites where Tajiri illuminates Japanese experiences of the past, making them visible and at times audible. In Lee's *Peace Light* a weather balloon becomes a locus for memories that cross the North and South Korean border and migrate on. Each work grounds us in a space of imagination.

These artists, like the others in *(ex)CHANGE*, know and hold deeply the trust of others whose histories they keep. For Tajiri this means creating a counterpoint between her own experiences and those she discovers and shares. Lee and Kim, working together for the first time, arrive at a crescendo at which they hold each other in counter-balance. It's a manifestation of trust and a suspension of judgment—“holding on to let go,” Kim calls it—that speaks to the overall ethos of *Peace Light*, and I might add all the works in *(ex)CHANGE*.

All of these works are acts of care: acts of healing for those involved, with the hope of healing others as well. The need to care, to give your weight to another and they to you, to trust: these are perhaps the final goals of *(ex)CHANGE*.



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12 From a grant application by the Asian Arts Initiative to the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2017.