

by Lynne McCabe



**When I was asked to write an artist's take on creative placemaking for this issue of *Cite I* had no intention of talking about love. And then, Ted Purves died.**

For those of you who did not have the good fortune to know Ted, he was brilliant and generous. A man with too many accomplishments to list here but some highlights include playing bass and singing in an Illinois punk band; marrying the smart and talented Susanne Cockrell, with whom he collaborated in not only raising a good and beautiful son; and also the creation of many thoughtful artworks. He launched the first Masters in Fine Arts curriculum in Social Practice at California College of the Arts in 2005, which is where I met him. And, he wrote the important, *What We Want is Free*, a book that looked to understand and contextualize a new type of art practice bubbling up in the early to mid 2000s.

This new practice, termed "Relational Aesthetics" by Nicholas Bourriaud, has since expanded to include everything from Joseph Beuys's "Social Sculpture," to Claire Bishop's definition of socially engaged practice. This genre of artistic practice has subsequently been instrumentally employed for some time now by non-profit and local government agencies alike, as a strategy for "creative placemaking."

Led by Ted, the CCA MFA in Social Practices was a program where practitioners of this type of work came from all over the world to passionately argue over what we felt were the most important issues to address in the field, such as what are the ethics of a socially engaged art practice? What is the moral obligation of the artist when working with or for people? Is there one? We struggled with the

dichotomy that the funding and further success of many socially engaged art projects was dependent upon gaining recognition from the very capitalist art world systems these works were purportedly resisting. Methodology and models of best practices were hotly debated.

Ted and I would often use the opportunity of getting our kids together at the park to continue these conversations. Over time it became apparent that my propensity for Marxist and feminist critique, almost to the exclusion of all else, frustrated the hell out of him. The frustration was often mutual – in my youthful inexperience and idealism I regarded his thinking about the potential for inclusivity and real social change as naïve and privileged. Ten years later I have now come to the realization that his thinking was far more deft and nuanced than I understood at the time.

I had come to San Francisco suspicious of such endeavors due to my experience of working directly with local government in Scotland in projects that deployed socially engaged artists and their practices as agents of urban regeneration. With few exceptions it had been my experience that the majority of these well-meaning projects served to give the impression of care and investment in the regeneration of many architecturally brutalized and economically beleaguered communities. In other words, they were public relations tools. All the while the projects merely become a distraction to the people who lived there from the harsh fact that they were still being underserved in basic infrastructure needs like working street lights, grocery stores, safe spaces for children to play, and reliable bus services.

Immediately after receiving my BA (hons) from the Environmental Art Dept. of Glasgow

School of Art, I naively accepted a position as one of these very agents and was employed by Glasgow city council as the "community coordinator" for an ongoing large-scale public art project in one of the city's forgotten housing projects. My primary purpose being to remedy issues that had arisen out of a lack of diversity in artist selection and little or no community conversations in the preliminary planning stages of the public art project.

Seeing the expectations of a community dashed, and the limitations of my role as an artist in preventing it or remedying it, had instilled in me a deep cynicism and a harsh criticality of the assumed beatific potential of this kind of practice. This cynicism informed my thinking and the work I was producing at the time I was accepted at CCA. When I started to see these same practices adopted in my new home of San Francisco, I was struck by an even darker side to positioning socially engaged art as an instrument in creative placemaking that exacerbates gentrification. A process capable of ultimately destroying said "creative place," and neighborhood.

Outside of class Ted and Suzanne welcomed me and the other students into their home, and community. This holistic approach to building loving networks of support and exchange extended beyond teaching into their own art practice.

Ted remained optimistic. He really did believe that done right this work could change lives; he embodied this optimism in every part of his life. This ethos was specifically demonstrated in his collaborative social sculpture Amity Works he made with his wife, Susanne Cockrell from 2004 to 2007. The project sought to explore community-built relationships by circumnavigating capitalist systems, instead building upon the cultural economies of generosity and gift giving. Over the course of three years Amity Works serviced the community by collecting and redistributing neighborhood surplus fruit, much of it planted by Italian immigrants, many who settled in the Temescal district of Oakland in the 1960s. The project centered around various events that brought the community together to uncover and discuss its rich history. The central image, a mobile fruit barrow, used to collect and redistribute the fruit, also served to make Ted and Susanne's intent to build a relational economy legible. As they moved through the neighborhood with the barrow they collected both fruit and oral histories, redistributing them back to their community "preserved" in the form of either marmalade or history-filled postcards that were free to all.

In his essay "Blows Against the Empire" contained in *What We Want is Free*, Ted proposed this kind of gift economy, based on generosity, as an act of resolute resistance. A punk response to the cynicism and capitalism with which the art world seems inebriated. But try as I might when we talked, I just couldn't get comfortable with this approach.

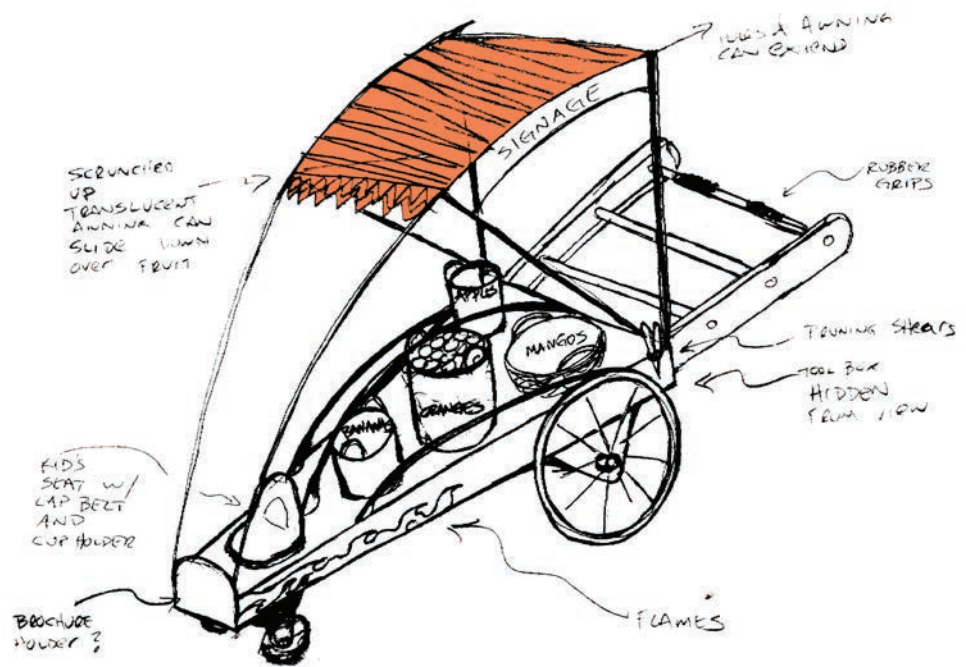
Like all forms of social exchange, gift giving is specific to the community and economy in which it is experienced. Ted saw the giving of a gift and its subsequent ties of obligation as a strategy for creating "kinship." However, in working-class Scotland where I grew up, and other similar cultures, the "obligation" inherent in the exchange does not always serve to bind together but instead delineates clearly the haves and the have-nots. Something is now owed.

Shared fruit from  
"Temescal Amity Works"  
(July 2004-January 2007).





“What unites us is a common need for connection. The work, the real creative placemaking is to make a space for that connection. As we look to the rebuilding of not only our city of Houston but cities across the country, it is my assertion that we need to acknowledge this collective need as the solution.”



Cart design by Ted Purves and Susanne Cockrell, “Temescal Amity Works.”

More recently we saw this partly manifest here in Houston in the distrust of authorities and the Red Cross during Hurricane Harvey, with people preferring to depend on each other instead. When one party has access to privilege and resources that the other does not have (and perhaps never will), a power imbalance is injected into the exchange, with suspicion replacing gratitude to make us conscious once more of our lack.

Ted’s optimism was in itself an act of resistance to the pernicious sense of scarcity that pervades not only the art world but, as we see from current political discourse, seemingly every community regardless of their privilege or resources.

At the end of one of our particularly frustrating discussions, a weary Ted turned to me and said, “Sure, it’s easy to point out what’s wrong with these practices. It’s easy to make critical work that merely points a finger at their failings and sort of simultaneously pats yourself on the back for being smart in figuring it out. But what are you offering in these broken models’ stead? What really are you giving us? What are you willing to risk? And where is your generosity?”

This challenge to turn away from cynicism towards a more generative, generous practice produced an ache in me. Upon self-reflection, I realized I felt paralyzed and exhausted making work that only reflected what was lacking in the various methodologies and practitioners of socially engaged art. How could this circulatory negation ever add anything positive to the discourse? As a result, I have spent the ensuing years attempting to embrace Ted’s challenge in my own practice which brings me back to the question, What does love have to do with all this?

It is my proposition that a radical love, one predicated on our assumed mutual perfection and not our lack may offer a strategy towards a new methodology for the engagement of artists attempting to take up Ted’s challenge.

The French feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray in her book, *The Way Of Love*, eloquently describes an interpersonal relational model as the “... constitution of two worlds open and in relation with one other, and which give birth to a third world as work in common and space-time to be shared.”

This model repudiates a presumptive lack in either party as they enter the relationship, in exchange for an active constantly negotiated and co-created state of becoming. Language and culture are created, not by a collapsing of the space between two to become one, but by a respectful attendance to the space between both. Community and “artist” subsequently conjuring a third space that is in a constant state of negotiation and becoming.

What unites us is a common need for connection. The work, the real creative placemaking is to make a space for that connection. As we look to the rebuilding of not only our city of Houston but cities across the country, it is my assertion that we need to acknowledge this collective need as the solution. Not a gift, but many gifts, a process of exchange, a becoming, together. If expanded upon as a foundation for socially engaged work in service, I believe this approach could hold the answer to the fraught class/privilege issues that arise for me in the radical gift economy model Ted so believed in.

As I write this almost ten years after my conversation with Ted, in a community still dealing with the aftermath of one of the worst disasters in its history, my beloved adopted home city of Houston, I am struck by the urgency for our collective creative communities, now more than ever, to turn away from the alienating cynicism of late capitalist culture and find a way to conjure Irigaray’s third world.

Ted’s challenges—“What are you offering in these broken models’ stead? What really are you giving us? What are you willing to risk? And where is your generosity?”—seemed to me

to be momentarily answered when the people of Houston came together in the aftermath of Harvey.

However, the question now is, How do we sustain this? Specifically, how do we resist the pitfalls of gentrification that creative placemaking can fall into, as we rebuild? How do we as artist and architects act as agents on behalf of existent cultures in the neighborhoods worst hit, many of which are also unsurprisingly amongst the most underserved neighborhoods in town, and protect them? What lessons learned from NOLA after Hurricane Katrina can we put into place to stop the price gouging of rents and the opportunistic land grabs of developers?

Ted was the embodiment of radical love in action. In his family life, in his art practice, and in how he taught and ran the MFA program at CCA. It is my assertion that the tools of socially engaged art and creative placemaking can bring about the culture of generosity and radical love that Ted challenged me to create. We find ourselves in a unique position full of possibilities wrought by Harvey’s destruction. If we mindfully go forward with the intent to conjure Irigaray’s “third world as work in common and space-time to be shared” as we plan and shape the rebuilding of our city, we can sustain and propagate, along the way, the idea of our city as a resistor to the cruel culture of misogyny, racism, and hatred of the Other, which has dominated so much of our recent political/social discourse. We can build upon the radical love that transformed strangers into fleets of people risking their lives for the unknown/unknowable Other.

As it turns out, the question is not What’s love got to do with it? but What are you going to do with your love?