

Reflections on *Retirement Bash*

“Be the change you want to see in the world”
-Mahatma Ghandi

In the social and political climate of 2008/2009 “change” was the word of the moment and “change (what, how, who, where)?” the uncertainty that naturally followed. We witnessed monumental change in the election of the United State’s first non-Caucasian president, and experienced the frustration stagnation in worldwide economic disparity, environmental injustice, and conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. For a number of years I have been asking questions about the relationship between art and political change and experimenting with ways art can activate various publics in social justice issues. I have explored these questions by creating such projects as an international performance exchange around the 2008 US presidential elections and an exhibit that investigates alternative economies.

When the Education Department of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles approached me with this opportunity, it seemed natural and necessary to ask questions about art, politics and public engagement with a group of high school students. Although I have been teaching college courses since 2007, this was my first chance to work with a group of teenagers. Instead of teaching a conventional class, this commission gave me the ability to collaborate on a performance event with the students, thus blurring the divide between my art and teaching practices.

Through working with the teens I learned a great deal about the capacities and power of adolescents. Going into the project I was aware of the enormous affect teenagers have on the culture, technology, or social movements of every generation. However, I was surprised by how much my students were inherently trying to break down the symbols and power structures around them. In an attempt to critically examine their surroundings, these group of teenagers I was working with were beginning to figure out how they can impact the world. I was extraordinarily inspired by the depth and sophistication of the students ideas and their fearlessness to try new things.

The *Retirement Bash* project tapped into the iconoclastic power of the Culver City AVPA Art students to imagine the “what, how, who, where” questions surrounding ideas of change in contemporary society. In each of the student’s projects, they pointed to issues that were important to them, including LGBT rights, environmentalism, and the eradication of racism, issues that affect all people in the United States. During the *Retirement Bash* event the students addressed their socio-political concerns by utilizing the power of art to alter their surrounding visual and conceptual landscape. In one performance two teenage girls proposed to each other and then to the entire audience, in another the whole audience was asked to clean up and recycle a large pile of trash.

Retirement Bash dealt with symbolic enactment, rather than hands-on activity. Although the Culver City High school students did not join a political protest or go door

to door, they performed a world they wanted to be a part of. This enactment included such activities as fixing old appliances rather than buying new ones, celebrating mistakes rather than demanding perfection. Seeing the potentials of a different world through the lens of adolescents was fresh, raw, and inspiring. *Retirement Bash* created a moment of catharsis and rejuvenation for those in attendance, a moment which I hope will not fade too quickly in our political and social landscape.

Elana Mann
January 2010