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Chats About Change: Changing the Terms of Engagement

Janet Owen Driggs



Chats About Change: Critical Conversations on Art and Politics features conversations addressing contemporary themes that artists and activists are developing in Los Angeles today.

Arising somewhere on the human interaction scale between fireside propaganda and "frivolous talk", chats aren't supposed to be dangerous, are they? The co-organizers of **Chats About Change: Critical Conversations on Art and Politics** must have missed that particular memo though, for their series opener was a high-density exchange of ideas, some of which, if we're lucky (and thoughtful, and brave), might actually jeopardize the status quo.

"Change" is rather a holy grail in the field where art and politics grow together: long sought after, elusive, and many would say imaginary. At the same time, overgenerous claims about the efficacy of some socially engaged artworks seem oblivious to the fact that an awful lot of deckchairs are being rearranged. In contrast, the recent "Flowers for Action, Seeds for Change" event at Cal State Los Angeles was imbued with an awareness that, rather than tinkering while sinking, real change requires the development of new terms of engagement.



Individuals in dialogue between presentations during Flowers For Action, Seeds For Change event at CalState University Los Angeles, part of Chats About Change event

1/15/15. | Photo: Emily Lacy.

Self-described as bringing together "Los Angeles-based artists and cultural practitioners who...are looking critically at the built environment and acting creatively to build new relationships with the land," the evening was co-organized by artists **Sandra de la Loza**, who also moderated, **Robby Herbst**, and **Elana Mann**.

"I definitely wanted to make the event about a questioning and reflection on our relationship to the land...in our case the So. Cal native landscape which coexists/clashes and lies beneath the vast spread of our built environment," Sandra wrote in a recent email exchange. "In asking myself the question of how can we decolonize the land and our relationship to it, I tried to bring in a wide range of people who might help point the direction."

The roster included Olivia Chumacero, founder of **Everything Is Medicine** (e.i.m.), who teaches from an indigenous perspective; community organizer and Youth of Color educator Rio j. contreras, who is part of the collectives **Raíces Roots**, **LA Rooted**, and **STAY** (Standing Together Advocating for our Youth); artist **Sarita Dougherty** of the Art & Nature collective, and the **Postnational Department of Transcultural Youth**; artist, musician, academic, and agitator **Christy Roberts**; and environmental artist, designer and, currently, land use planner, **Jane Tsong**.



The Postnational Department of Transcultural Youth | Image and permission, Sarita Dougherty.

Additionally, the structure of the event played such a significant role that it might have been a sixth participant. Departing from the standard talking heads/spectating audience model of interaction by way of "radical pedagogy...social justice organizing...indigenous ceremony, and talking circles" (de la Loza), chairs were arranged in five circles, and circle discussions facilitated by the presenters followed each presentation, or pair of presentations.

With approximately 130-participants -- so many that the hallway 'overflow' grew its own session; about 20 minutes per presenter and a similar amount of time for each round of chat; and a definitive cut-off time by which the building had to be empty, the evening was jam-packed, intense, and increasingly urgent.

That sense of urgency was an appropriate companion to Olivia Chumacero's presentation. Not because she is prone to preach about climate change -- far from it -- but because, as she later commented: "I just assume that everyone is aware" of the **Great Acceleration** and its potential consequences for life on Earth.

Using a mix of local, indigenous, and personal history, photography, public practice, ethno-botany, and her own poetry, Chumacero told fragments of the much larger story that is her (non-Humanist, non-Enlightenment, non-Judeo Christian, non-Modern) understanding of the universe and humanity's (non-central) place in it. So different is her conception from that of the dominant paradigm, that perhaps only fragments and poetry are possible:

"When we go to harvest a plant, we don't think 'what am I going to take,' we offer something first -- a song, a thought, water -- and then we harvest. It's the same as you and me...The plant is only a different manifestation of energy. We have to break the perception that we are better than it, that the plant is here for us, that it's only a plant. It has the same relationship to water and air as us."

"Before ANIMALS

Plants

Before PLANTS

Fungi

Before FUNGI

Protista

Before PROTISTA

Monera

Before MONERA

Before, before

Water

Sun

Carbon dioxide

and atmospheric winds

Before WINDS

Light

Darkness

Emptiness

Void

Before the VOID

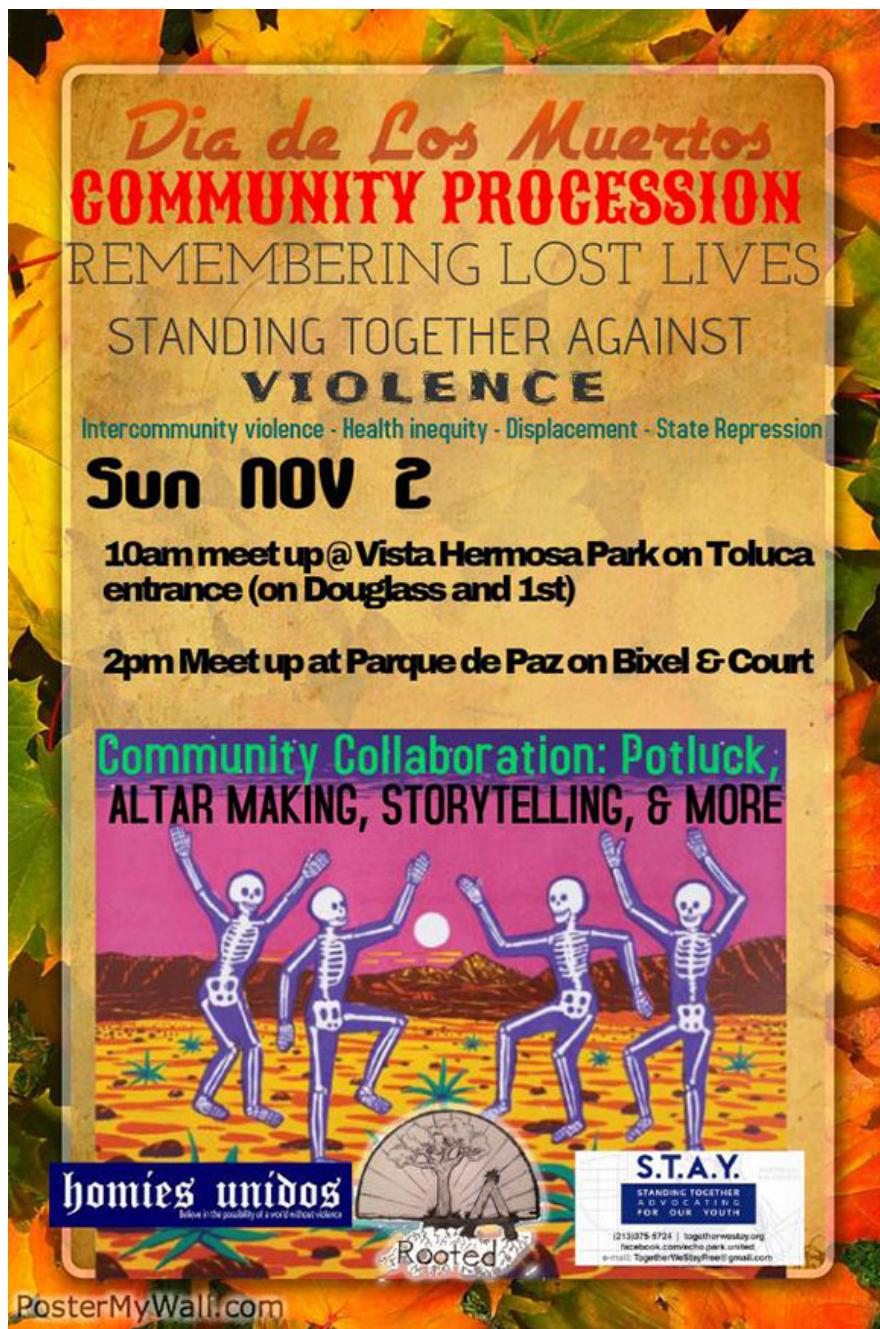
silence."

"We must change our palette. Not insist on strawberries in the middle of winter."

Like Chumacero, her long-term mentor, Sarita Dougherty points her direction for change by living it. Her home, she explained, "is a yurt on the side of a mountain," where she plants, eats the growing greens, humanures, paints, shifts tempo in accordance with her menstrual cycle, and co-devise "methodologies for self-guided learning in groups." These include the Art & Nature methodology, which "has been foolproof for 100-youth," and the Postnational Department of Transcultural Youth, with which she is currently in the first year of studying for a D.I.Y. Ph.D.

"Postnational, what does it mean?" Dougherty asks, and answers: "no borders after the dominance of the nation-state. And Transcultural...that's the Mestizo part of me, balancing many world views at once." Asked how she decides when to rely on Western pedagogy, and when to draw on "de-colonial" practices, Dougherty explains that her route between the two is determined by intuition. "Getting present with ourselves...the path is

revealed." The presentation ends with a drawn-out collective sigh, as, having responded enthusiastically to an invitation to "start making any sound that wants to come out," the audience slowly runs out of breath.



Remembering All Lives Lost: Dia de los Muertos Community Procession Against Violence & Displacement, organized by Homies Unidos, STAY and L.A. Rooted.
Temple/Beaudry and Pilipino Town, 11.02.2014. | Poster by Rio j. contreras, permission LA Rooted.

"Artists have been no different from developers in seeing the desert as a blank slate on which to build," said Jane Tsong, who considered iconic works of 1970s land art through the lens of their ecological impact. Demonstrating that, when artists use living landscapes they become implicated in vast ecological and sociological relationship networks, she cited "**Everything is Still Alive**" (2007), a project for which she planted California Poppies on exposed earth in economically disparate LA areas.

In addition to highlighting land use patterns, Jane learned that her commercially produced seeds "had as much to do with native wild poppies as a Yorkshire terrier has to do with a wild dog." It's a matter of adaptation, she explained. While the California poppy may have a unified symbolic identity, there is actually great diversity within the species, with one botanist alone tallying **70 form variations** of *Eschscholzia californica*. In contrast, cultivated seed has lost genetic variation and millennia of locally specific "fine tuning," which means that cross-pollination between wild and commercially produced seeds can cause localized plants to become less hardy. As a result, says botanist Curtis "**planting poppies in the wrong**

place can actually reduce, rather than increase, the acreage of our State Flower."

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When Christy Roberts' father was diagnosed with stage-4 cancer in 2010, the artist began to notice "absences in the landscape," and started seeding vacant lots with California poppies (locally sourced when possible). "The potential was in not building," she explained. While "**The Poppy Project**," the multi-faceted artwork that her actions initiated, describes the bright orange flower as "a warning to developers, that the community has chosen to take over this piece of land."

California Penal Code § 384a states that the removal of plant life "growing upon public land or upon land not [your] own" may be punishable by law, while **Penal Code § 602** defines squatting as an illegal activity. A figurative skip on both sides of these laws, and an actual intervention into ecological and social networks, "*The Poppy Project*" exemplifies a practice that the artist describes as "an attempt to reconcile escapism and revolution." "Both my parents were police officers" Roberts explains, "I was a cheerleader." "I want to be Emma Goldman and watch Real Housewives."



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1/15/15. | Photo: Emily Lacy.

Gentrification was on the minds of participants too. When an L.A. County Court issued a permanent gang injunction in Echo Park in 2013, despite historically low levels of crime locally, it was "crystal clear that what they wanted to do was actually a brown cleansing," said Rio j. contreras. "Our name implies it, we want to STAY in our communities...[so we're] resisting the gang injunction, and resisting that displacement."

Complementing STAY, LA Rooted cultivates urban youth as community leaders. It was formed, Rio explained, after Raices Roots biked to Guatemala to "reconnect with our ancestral roots" and "honor my Mom's journey...to the States by land." "The de-colonialism is so important...we knew when we were on the trip [that] we needed to bring whatever knowledge we gained there back to our communities here."

The groups' recent "collective creations for community organizing" include: "**Day of the Dead procession against all violence**" with Hommies Unidos; **Bicycle Ride for Freedom (we say no to gang injunctions)** with a Youth Justice Coalition-organized **Police Zombie Take-Over**; and the Radical Youth Summer Camp, where "**healthy eating, cycling, walking, bussing, capoeira...talks about gender, menstrual cycles, gang injunctions..Filipino radical history, and so much more,**" taught students about staying "rooted to our health, community, and earth." An upcoming **Loving Accountability Bike Tour** will consider "how to hold ourselves [and others] accountable in the ways we perpetuate being in trauma."

"Flowers for Action, Seeds for Change" was an "undisciplined" event. Not in any disorderly sense -- the evening was most carefully structured -- but in the sense that it was not confined within what the editors of online journal Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society define as: "**the artificial disciplinary demarcations of dominant ways of knowing and being.**" As a result, the event ruptured the customary insularity of art

world conversations by bringing together "students from many disciplines...poc [people of color], community organizers, and...art world people" (S. de la Loza). It was, said Jane Tsong, "an amazing confluence of cultural practices, experiences, and generations. The format of chat in small groups interspersed by speakers blurred hierarchies. [It] showed that a diversity of voices and experiences really enriches the conversation and broadens the stakes for what we can hope to accomplish."



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Even so, it was not the undisciplinary pleasures of the evening per se that generated its most pungent status quo-challenging whiff, nor even the specific actions under discussion. It was instead something larger than either and encompassing both, which Robby Herbst alluded to in a concluding question. Observing that the speakers' diverse practices operate "between an artificial culture, which may itself be a construct, and the natural landscape, which we look at as something that is endemic," he asked, "how is it that you work with that, or resist that 'Cartesian split' in your activist works?"

The processes inferred by the term "decolonization" must surely include an unpicking of all those assumptions on which the edifice "colonization" is built, and, more than an unpicking, a weaving and re-weaving of other ways of being. And this, I think, is where the power of the Chat lived: firstly in the challenge that most of its participants offered to a foundational assumption of Western ontology -- the belief that human beings are essentially different from and superior to the "everything else" that we name "nature;" second, in the very different terms of engagement between "everything else" and "us" that they intimated. Un-knit the wall between "human" and "nature" and some attendant hierarchical binaries may also begin to unravel -- mind/body, black/white, them/us -- perhaps even the grip of binary thinking might begin to loosen its hold.

"Change can happen in multiple ways," Sandra de la Loza commented after the Cal State L.A. event, "organizing panel discussions on critical topics is not enough." Or, as artist Kim Abeles put it when describing her response to Olivia Chumacero's presentation: "We need to become her message."

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Chats About Change: Critical Conversations on Art and Politics is a series of panel discussions addressing contemporary themes creative practitioners are developing in L.A.

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Top Image: Remembering All Lives Lost: Dia de los Muertos Community Procession Against Violence & Displacement, organized by Homies Unidos, STAY and L.A. Rooted. | Photograph by Timo Saarelma, permission L.A. Rooted.

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