Screen Printing as Political Movement

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Introduction

As of currently, I am an employed intern at Taller Arte del Nuevo Amanecer (TANA), which translated into English means Art Workshop of the New Dawn, that has its main objectives to provide a space that fosters cultural consciousness through the means of art as being integral to communal and individual well being and empowerment. As someone who has a position within the space and has influence to the active creation of it, I will be critically analyzing if TANA is manifesting its goals into reality through participatory observation. Is the intention in creating TANA imbedded with the legacy of screen printing from the Chicana/o Movement, allow the space to be an alternative learning site that challenges hegemonic American ideologies?

In order to investigate this question, I will be historically contextualizing screen printing and its uses. Then, I will give my personal narratives and experiences of the space to situate TANA and my active participation there along with some encounters with students there to see the effects of the space. While doing this, I will be juxtaposing the space to that of a ‘typical’ classroom.

Historical Legacies

During the Great Depression, the US federal government utilized art as a way to bolster the attitude of the people. Programs created during that time such as Treasury Relief Art Project or TRAP hired artists to create art for the people with the intention of instilling trust for the government (Treasury Relief Art Project). One of the ways they created art was through silk screening or better known as serigraphy in formal art spaces, because the popular medium is able to create multiples because of its accessibility and ease of use. Instead of putting in work to
create one painting, it allows one an efficient way to recreate the image several times in a row. I will briefly explain a simplified process in the next paragraph.

The materials needed for the common day process of silk screening is a screen, squeegee, and paint. The screen is essentially a piece of mesh stretched tightly over a wooden or metal frame. The screen has tiny holes that allow paint to go through if pressure is put onto it with the squeegee. In order to get the required image, stencils are created to block out the space on the screen in order to render the image wanted onto paper (see figure 1 below). The process of creating a final image and creating the stencils is a separate process, which is a large part of what TANA focuses on to teach the students.

Once again, silk screening gained popularity in the 60s and 70s during the Civil Rights movements where groups like the Black Panthers and the Chicana/o Movement utilized it in order to serve as their medium in society because of their lack of access and representation to media. These marginalized groups used posters as their platform to be seen and heard. “The creative process is an agency of transformation” (Anzaldua 35). For these people, the art was created by the people for the people in order to improve their existing conditions that are created out of racist, classist, ableist, and sexist ideologies. Art is no longer a luxury. The images created through screen printing is not just art for them, but a form of knowledge, empowerment, and also a voice for their political statement through the form of a poster.

Because of this intentional use of the medium, Malaquias Montoya initiated the poster making class though the Chicana/o Department at the University of California Davis. Upset at the institutionalization of ethnic studies, and as a student himself during the 60s and 70s, Montoya spent his time not necessarily in class, but out there with the grape strikers and the Third World strikers. As an artist and teacher, that experience was majorly influential to his
pedagogies since he knew the conditions of people is not necessarily best learnt about in a book, but rather through experience (Goldman 50). This influence is a part of the creation of TANA and why he is a co-founder of the space.

**Taller Arte del Nuevo Amanecer**

The mission statement for the space as an extension of the poster making class from UCD, is to foster a sense of well being and empowerment as a community while also fostering their consciousness. A fully functioning silk screening art studio in the Woodland area, the space offers free classes to those ages 13 and up (“About”). When one walks in, there is one large studio space with several white tables spread out for workspace. Half the tables are for creating a layout image and working on stencils, there is a light table for drawing, and there are a couple tables reserved for the actual printing process. The hours TANA is open for students used to be 3-6 p.m. on Mondays-Thursdays and on Fridays from 2-6 p.m. to allow a more flexible schedule for students needs since we require that students come in to complete 4 hours of studio time a week. The only mandatory time we ask them to come in is the first day of a session to attend a demonstration that elaborates on the space’s values and the screen printing process, although continuing students may skip this. And since we only have the demonstration time once a session, if students choose not to continue, the manager will fill in the slots with new students who then get the attention of an intern or staff to get the breakdown of what screen printing is and how to do it.

**Critical Analysis and Studies**

When I first learned screen printing at UCD through the poster making class, there was a sense of community that was created through the studio on campus. All of us were working individually, but would support or provide ideas for one another or even help one another with
the process, so we were never truly succeeding individually because our knowledge was cumulative, which goes against the individualistic environment created by the formal educational systems in the US. This is not what I experienced or witnessed when I was first hired at TANA through the recommendation of Carlos Jackson who is the other co-founder and current instructor of the poster making class on campus, which was the summer of 2015. There was no formal training for us as interns, but I know I was hired due to my quick learning abilities that was shown through my own poster making as well as my experience in art along with my knowledge of adobe systems like Photoshop. But similar to the other three interns, we all have a passion for social justice.

As classes started for the fall session, the number of students that committed was sparse. Talking to students was awkward for myself as well with the other interns. At the end of 2015, there was a meeting at the home of assistant professor Maceo Montoya, who is the project director of TANA. The meeting’s purpose was to problem solve and brain storm new tactics to bring the vision of the space into a reality. I had suggested that there was a lack of community and that we needed to actively build cohesiveness because it seemed that people would come in as individual students, and then come work individually without every actually growing open to the space and with the staff. Another issue I saw was that the last required print we asked of our students needs to be something political, in which we never really described but assumed had to do with the power that influenced our lives.

I elaborated with my co-workers that I currently work with high school students back at my hometown twice a month for an outreach program that is similar to a conscious raising group from the 60s and 70s. What I had noticed from my experience as director and facilitator of that group, and from my own experience as a high school student, is that students are not taught to
think critically about their lives or even investigate what ‘political’ means because the origins of the public educational system in the US is meant to socialize people to be good citizens for our nation. Because good being determined by those in power who are historically white, straight, middle-upper class, cis-men, the issue with this is that education was seen as a form of homogenizing, therefore ignoring the differences that are prevalent not only in our society, but around the world. The lack of address perpetuates an inherently white supremacist ideology of what is the commonwealth, therefore leaving students of color left out of the system (Resnick and Spring). I decided it was problematic to push such a project onto the students without them really knowing how to create a visual message around a political idea they hardly knew about. Other’s also decided that maybe the way we did the required demonstration was not clear to the people about our ideological goals and was not enticing enough to draw on the attention of students, which might also explain why our numbers are low.

Before we started the winter session classes, all the staff and interns came together to come up with some basic strategies to address the issues brought up from the past end of the year meeting. During the demonstration that was lead by Malaquias, we would include stories of the legacies of his work in the Chicana/o Movement to portray the importance around the work and to inspire those who have never been exposed to art in that way. We also decided to emphasize that students did not have to think of themselves as artists because the process of screen printing would carry their ideas as long as they had an idea. For the following first days of workshop after the demonstration, we decided to not help everyone individually, but in small groups to walk them along the process so it becomes inherently a communal effort to try and learn. We moved the tables to work on stencils together to give opportunity to folks being in the same space as one another rather than fall into an isolated setting that is often internalized by the public school
system. To supplement a shared space, we also did not allow headphones or earphones to be used by the students and gave them the opportunity to use the speakers in the workshop to share their music with everyone. Both staff and students were not allowed to play any music with excessive derogatory words, which is a form of censorship, and often censors black music that is expressively angry and political. And although that rule does limit what can be played during workshop time, it is meant as a liability issue since many of the students are under the age of 18.

The trouble with coming up with a set of solid strategies is because we cannot control when students decide to come in, let alone that all four of the interns were not there all days. We had to learn to be flexible and remember our intentions when interacting with students. Similar to Kevin Gaines’ argument in “Of Teachable Moments and Specters of Race” in which he advocates for using specific moments in history such as Obama’s presidency to teach, in this case legacies of racism, the workshop utilizes what they have in the moment to help students learn from one another and a particular situation (Gaines 195-97). For example, when a student may be moving quicker than others in the process and they come along a problem of how to build stencils from lightest to darkest color, we momentarily disrupt everyone and do mini lessons. This brings together any curiosities or questions students may have and gives them the means of sharing their knowledge if they have already encountered it before. Our loose goals were to instill that sense of community and the idea of reciprocity; that we can all learn from one another.

When students need visual examples, we as the interns often utilize our own work or other student’s work to share because all the interns are college students, and we are closer in age with the high school students. Because of the closeness in age, it allows a cross-age peer mentorship to occur with all the interns and students. It allows the students to feel safer and
allow themselves to be more vulnerable to ask for help because we have been transparent and let them know we are learning as well from other such as our staff member Jaime, who is our artist in residence, who has his Masters in Fine Arts. I believe that requiring interns to be students at UCD is a good requirement since it is the interns that work on the floor closely with the students. The closeness in age is key because it raises self-efficacy in high school students due to the more lateral level power dynamic. This type of relationship should foster encouragement and guidance with social support, but limited instruction (Bryant and Terborg, 11; Karcher, 292). Self-efficacy is the first step towards progressing towards a competent youth who is more confident in themselves to act on their agency, which is a process towards critical thinking and fostering their consciousness. Cross-age peer mentorships can benefit both the mentor and mentee. Studies have shown that for the mentor, which in this case would be the interns, there is an increase in interpersonal gains such as: development of communication, confidence, and identity (Mood, 380). As for the both the mentor and mentee, there are shown improvements in relationships with peers, teachers, and family. In specific for the mentees, their attitudes and connectedness to school, peers, self-efficacy, academic achievement, and social skills increase positively (Karcher, 292). And as Maceo Montoya has said in the past, he wants the space to act as a lifeline for those who may need it, e.g. students ‘at-risk’ of dropping out of school or going to jail.

The space as a studio for screen printing seems to be popular and powerful since the creation of images by the students and for the students is an extension of their agency. As Stuart Hall notes, representation and images are powerful tools of hegemony. The term ‘hegemony’ coined by Antonio Gramsci and utilized in media studies is a way in which to understand how power is gained and maintained through social consent (Lull). It informs my understanding to see how different mediums are used to create a common discourse and ideology which people
uphold, therefore creating a regime of common sense that structures society. This goes back then to the legacies of why screen printing was utilized since was used as an anti-capitalistic form of production for multiples, but for the platform of existence and resilience of marginalized groups to better their conditions for everyone and not something for profit.

In comparison to a typical classroom, TANA as an educational space actively tries to dispel the normative power dynamics. A typical classroom has seats where each student is kept individually, all oriented towards the front of a space to view a screen, board, and teacher. The studio has no ‘front’ because students will be in different places of the studio according to where they are in their screen printing process. As stated earlier as well, an anti-individualist ideology is attempting to be instilled through the recognition of communal efforts. This is actually amplified through our mini lessons when we begin teaching students how to create stencils. Because of the one of the materials called rubylith is used to create stencils is expensive, we bring students together to see how we use scraps of the material and put it together instead of using a whole new sheet of rubylith. We emphasize that that classes are free because art is a pricey trade, and that we are funded by grants. And that in order for the space to exist and be sustainable, we need to be aware of our usage of the materials so that way future students can continue to have the experience and knowledge they now have. This thinking draws on indigenous paradigms of the seventh generation, which reminds us to think of how those preceding us have done work to get us to where we are, and we are in a current position to provide for and think about the next seven generations as well (Joseph). By emphasizing these points and being transparent with the students, it transfers some of the accountability to them, thereby creating a communal effort to preserve the space.
In order to alleviate the my personal concerns about having students engage with a topic they are not necessarily exposed to often, I decided to just share my daily life stories with students. These can range from a silly story of myself to a serious topic I learned about in class or my feelings on particular subjects such as the Black Lives Matter movement. By doing this, I can at least expose the students since it is not required of them to do research on anything since they are still high school students and have other obligations. From then on, when students begin to work on their third print I am able to meet them where they are at with a topic and give my advice on how to render it.

**Current Observations**

During this past session, two students who are in high school often came in together to do work. For privacy concerns, I will call them John and Jane and will be using the gender-neutral pronouns they/them. I remember they were in a group with me when I started to speak of the economy being influenced by colonization and to explain instances of micro-loans. I briefly explained how what are considered first-world nations are able to determine the economic fate of third-world or developing nations because of the legacies of colonialism and imperialism. The next week, John started working on an iconic image of Jesus being crucified on a large dollar sign rather than a wooden cross and explained how they were trying to render the idea of these “bigger countries trying to save other places.”

Jane finished their political poster on Donald Trump before John finished theirs, so Jane would often speak with me since they had more time during workshop hours. Although Jane did often come to help John with their print since they both became familiar and confident in the printmaking process enough to assist one another. But it became obvious to me that Jane felt comfortable and safe in the space because I pulled them aside to speak with them more directly
about their experience at TANA. They spoke of an instance where they were in an argument with their mother and had a bad day. Later that day when they were at TANA, they went to the bathroom to cry and eventually came out and to interact with the interns. Jane told me that we put them in a better mood and that there were good vibes in the space because we made them feel good by just talking to them as a person. I then asked Jane how our workshop space differed to other spaces where they learned art. Jane went into speaking how they did not think of themselves as an artist or even as creative because art classes before made them feel as if formal training was required. They really enjoyed that the interns spoke in a way that made sense and did not seem exclusive to the type of training they inferred about. It was also mentioned that they enjoyed just hearing the interns talk to one another about social justice issues because they thought we are all very passionate about it and liked being exposed to these things they knew hardly anything about if they were even aware of it at all. And by allowing them into a space in which their voice is heard and validated as holding real knowledge, they are further fostered in their agency because there is power in telling. As stated earlier in the paper, the posters created provided a means of allowing marginalized groups within the US rewrite their own history because there is power within the narratives that has real effects on their lives (Trouillot 1-30).

Later in this conversation with Jane, they began to explain their dislike for school. They were very conscious and explained to me that even if they are good at math, if they did badly on one test that affects their grade and designates them as dumb. This made me connect to Paulo Freire’s terms “domesticating education” and “banking education.” The former is a way to describe the school system as of now, which emphasizes passivity, acceptance, and submissiveness. The later is the concept that students are empty vessels in which teachers fill them up (Nieto and Bode 54). These both refer back to the historical origins of education that
were mentioned earlier because monoculturalism is what is emphasized therefore differences are not seen as strengths, but weaknesses that must be transformed into a homogenous way of being to coincide with hegemonic America.

Another intentional change is influenced by a co-worker who stated that Saturday workshop hours would help with accessibility in terms of rides and other commitments people make throughout the work/school week. This then enacted our hours to be open from Tuesday-Friday 3-6 p.m. and Saturday from 11 a.m.-4 p.m., which has allowed many people who cannot come during Mondays-Fridays to meet our requirement of 4 hours in studio time over the weekend. Alongside our intentions to find ways to be a space more easily accessible in this way, is we can provide bus passes to those who may need them. Even more so, the manager of the space offers rides to students who may need a ride home when they cannot get a hold of their guardian. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the classes are free in order to make sure that this form of art is accessible to anyone of any class background because we provide all the materials and make a collective effort to conserve materials.

TANA has made improvements in my observations since the last session. And even if the legacies of screen printing are not making full impact with students, they are at least exposed to an alternative learning space that is meant to foster their positionality as a whole person by allowing and encouraging them to utilize their life experiences and knowledge to inform their art. I believe that the intentions of the creation of the space, and the current effort right now do allow the workshops to be an alternative educational space. Due to the difference in spatial organization and the difference in pedagogies, TANA is a political statement in opposition to the formal classroom space and is a space in its existence vital to the creations of alter-narratives.
Figure 1:

Image source: http://i00.i.aliimg.com/img/pb/953/793/704/704793953_115.jpg
Works Cited


