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The Power to Envision Change: Art as Environmental Activism

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The Power to Envision Change: Art as Environmental Activism

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Environmental Studies
Bates College

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirement for the Degree of the
Bachelor of Arts

By
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Thesis Chapter 1: The Role of Art in Activism

“Art can’t change anything except people—but art changes people, and people can make everything change.” - Tony Kushner

How can art work to effectively communicate environmental messages? Does its power differ from other methods of communication? In what ways are different forms of art effective for different purposes? What audiences do different forms of art reach, and what are the implications of accessibility? Seeking to answer these questions, in this thesis I will explore the work of three artists whose work addresses environmental concerns in imaginative and alternative ways. I chose to write about these three specific artists because I have had the opportunity to meet and interact with each of them in person, during their various visits to Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. I also chose them because they exemplify a diversity of media, approaches, aesthetics, philosophies, and methods of activism. As an Environmental Studies major and a Dance minor at Bates, the work of these artists inspires me because of its hybridity as both art and activism.

I met photographer Chris Jordan during his visit to Bates when he was chosen as the 2012 Phillip J. Otis Environmental Lecturer. I spoke with Jordan about his work during a lunch meeting, and also attended his evening presentation, which included a slide show featuring work from his *Running the Numbers* series as well as his *Midway* series. I was moved by the poignancy of his images and the diversity of his approach in depicting consumption on both a vast scale and a painfully intimate scale. Seeing Jordan’s presentation caused me to wonder, what is my role as a piece of this puzzle? How do my actions have larger implications? What can I do to change these vast problems?

I found myself asking similar questions, and also new ones, during Marc Bamuthi Joseph's several visits to our campus. "Bamuthi," as he often refers to himself, is a spoken word, theater, and dance artist. During my first three years as a student, I have taken class with him as a guest teacher of a poetry class (2011), a dance class (2012), and an environmental studies class (2012). The fact that I have worked with Bamuthi in classes from three different disciplines illustrates the diversity of his talents and interests. In each class he encouraged students to think in terms of intersections and relationships, such as between ourselves and our communities, and between text and movement. I also attended the play *red, black & GREEN a blues*, performed by him and a team of other artists at the Lewiston Armory in 2012. Bamuthi's performance moved me to tears, and captivated me to the degree that I came back a second night to experience the power and beauty of the play again.

Like Bamuthi's work, I saw the Beehive Design Collective's murals several times before I understood their context. I first encountered the Beehive Design Collective, a group of artists and activists, at a student environmental conference called Powershift in Washington, D.C. in 2011. The vibrancy and complexity of the Beehive's graphic images captured my interest at once, and I bought a poster from them. It was not until I saw them present one of their works of art the next year at the Common Ground Fair, (an annual celebration of rural living in Maine,) that I began to realize the meaning and intention behind the posters. I was excited to host two members of the Beehive at Bates during March of this year in order to further my research for this thesis, during which they presented their artwork *MesoAmerica Resiste!*

Each of these artists varies widely in aesthetic approach, creative process, and intended audience. I will describe each artist in turn, combining analysis of the artwork with additional scholarly sources that will shed light on particular aspects of the art's approach, political and economic implications, and usefulness. In doing so, I hope to provoke critical thought about art's potential for activism. I also hope to use the artists' examples to broaden our conceptions of what "art" and "activism" mean, and to re-imagine what an artist's role can be both as a citizen and as a catalyst for social and political change.

Without further ado, let us turn to the artists who comprise this thesis. The Beehive Design Collective is a group of art activists based in Machias, Maine whose mission statement begins, "*To cross-pollinate the grassroots, by creating collaborative, anti-copyright images that can be used as educational and organizing tools*" ("Who We Are: Beehive Design Collective"). The Beehive often draws on imagery of bees and pollinators to explain their people-to-people, grassroots approach. Their images are "anti-copyright," meaning that they are accessible to anyone who wants to print and distribute them for educational purposes. These aspects of the Beehive make them a unique and visionary organization. The mission statement continues,

In the process of this effort we seek to take the "who made that!?" and "how much does it cost!?" out of our creative endeavors, by anonymously functioning as word-to-image translators of the information we convey. We build, and disseminate these visual tools with the hope that they will self-replicate, and take on life of their own. ("Who We Are: Beehive Design Collective")

The Bees' mission emphasizes creating an alternative to profit-focused art through a democratized, participatory model of education and storytelling. The artists achieve this

mission by living with communities affected by environmental and social justice issues, gathering stories of these communities, and then visually represent these stories on large, intricate posters that are used for educational presentations. Their process allows the Bees to represent people's stories and voices. They also create the art collaboratively, without attaching their names to their work or seeking recognition as individual artists.

For the Beehive Design Collective, art is not merely visual representation, but also storytelling. One way the Bees make their art a story rather than a literal presentation of fact is their choice to represent people as animals who have a metaphoric connection to the group they represent. They choose animals carefully, not only thinking about their connection to the specific type of people they represent but also meticulously choosing animals who are native to the ecological region in which the story of the poster takes place. For example, the Beehive's poster *Free Trade Area of the Americas and the Global Resistance to Corporate Colonialism* tells the story of the economic and political domination of Latin America by the United States, and uses dozens of different species of ants to represent Latin American workers. Their choice of ants alludes to the mechanized nature of work and the undermining of the worth of individuals in these countries because of globalization, and also the peoples' resilience in organizing against forces of globalization. In their description of the meaning of the poster, the Bees write,

Ants marching in from the left (the global south) symbolize the inspiring and powerful struggles of the groups such as Movimiento Sem Terra, the landless peasant movement of Brazil, and the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico. (*Free Trade Area of the Americas and the Global Resistance to Corporate Colonialism* 5)

The use of animals to represent people helps to identify common struggles and goals that unify different groups. Animals also serve to eliminate stereotypical depictions of groups

of people. For instance, in this poster, the Bees' choice to draw an ant that can represent many resistance groups rather than drawing a specific leader of one group may help members and sympathizers of the movements portrayed all see themselves as part of a larger struggle against globalization. This ability to find shared experiences and identities between groups and show them in their larger context helps the Bees achieve their mission to "cross-pollinate the grassroots."

The Beehive Design Collective's financial structure is donation based and not for profit. This structure keeps them on a smaller scale in terms of being "successful" and famous in a conventional sense. You are unlikely to find the Beehive's work in prestigious art galleries, and the artists themselves do not make any profit from the art. Yet, this small-scale nature can also be seen as the group's greatest strength because it grants them freedom to embody their ideals of democracy, equality and accessibility without depending on getting sponsorship, advertising themselves, or trying to be "successful" in a mainstream way. Emma McCumber, a member of the Beehive who visited Bates, talked about her travel plans for her next Beehive presentation, saying she was not sure if the Beehive would fund her flight, but if not, she would just hitchhike her way there. This sort of freedom and adventurousness, unhindered by financial concerns, seems typical of Beehive members (McCumber).

Though also environmentally focused, photographer Chris Jordan differs from the Beehive in many ways, including being a more "successful" artist than the Bees, in the sense that his work appears in famous galleries throughout the world. Jordan is based in Seattle, but his work has brought him from Midway Island to Kenya's northern rangelands to prison complexes and garbage facilities in the United States in search of

ways to visually represent environmental issues, especially relating to mass consumption.

Jordan's goals differ from the Bees or Bamuthi because he emphasizes visual

representations of statistics. Jordan states,

My hope is that images representing these quantities might have a different effect than the raw numbers alone, such as we find daily in articles and books. Statistics can feel abstract and anesthetizing, making it difficult to connect with and make meaning of 3.6 million SUV sales in one year, for example, or 2.3 million Americans in prison, or 426,000 cell phones retired every day...My underlying desire is to affirm and sanctify the crucial role of the individual in a society that is increasingly enormous, incomprehensible, and overwhelming. ("Winsor Gallery: Chris Jordan")

Chris Jordan's photographs, like Bamuthi's dance and the Beehive's graphic posters, attempt to present us a different window through which to see an environmental or social justice issue, and in doing so provide new ways to *see ourselves* as part of the issue. This imaginative space creates vast possibilities for transformation. An interesting aspect of this statement is his goal to "affirm and sanctify the crucial role of the individual," which differs from other artists' aims to make an individual feel part of a larger community. His individualistic approach is reflected in his suggestion of how an individual should respond to the information he presents.

When he presented at Bates, he answered an audience member's question "so, what should we do?" by saying he could not give us an answer, that any answer he gave would minimize the importance of the issues, and that we each have to find our own answers based on our feelings of grief ("Encountering Midway"). This position places responsibility for action on the individual, as opposed to society as a whole, as Bamuthi's work does, or on transnational corporations and governments involved in "corporate colonialism," as the Beehive's work does.

An interesting aspect of Jordan's mission is his goal to counteract the "anesthetizing" feeling created by overwhelming statistics. His work takes a statistic and invites us to stop and really delve into examining what the statistic means, rather than hearing it as a brief sound bite and then moving on without processing it or finding one's relation to it. If one were to view Jordan's work in a gallery, which he says is the best way to experience it, there would be a process of experiencing the work. First one would see the large canvas from a distance and appreciating the vastness of its scale, and then be able to walk up to it and see each individual part.

For instance, if a gallery-goer walked up to in his piece *Gyre*, (part of his series *Running the Numbers II: Portraits of global mass culture*), she would first see a beautiful and familiar image based on the famous Japanese painting *The Great Wave off Kanagawa*, but as she got closer she would see that the wave is comprised of 2.4 million pieces of plastic, which is "equal to the estimated number of pounds of plastic pollution that enter the world's oceans every hour" ("Chris Jordan- Running the Numbers II"). The viewer's way of interacting with Jordan's photograph makes literal the experience of being a part of modern American consumer culture. Many forces, including advertising, green-washing, political rhetoric, and social norms, prevent us from truly seeing the scale and impact of our consumption, but as one looks closer it becomes alarming and hopefully motivating to realize the vastness and effect of our actions. By creating this experience for the viewer, Jordan invites the viewer to continue to look past the appealing facades of consumerism and materialism and examine what is really going on and how our own choices are connected to larger trends.

Marc Bamuthi Joseph, the third artist this thesis focuses upon, lies somewhere between Jordan and the Beehive on the spectrum of alternative or mainstream. He also stands between the other two on the spectrum of emphasizing the individual or the communal. Marc Bamuthi Joseph is a spoken word artist, hip hop performer, dancer, actor and environmental activist based in Oakland California. Bamuthi has worked in many cities across the country performing work and making place-based pieces that tell stories of environmental and social justice issues. His artist statement reads,

Aesthetically urban, pedagogically Freirean, I derive personal performed narratives out of interdisciplinary collaboration. This work as writer and performer reflects an evolving aesthetic that integrates spoken word poetry with contemporary movement to birth a new theatrical form based on hip hop aesthetics. The approach is populist, intentionally instructive, and demonstrably experimental in terms of literacy and literary form. ("Marc Bamuthi Joseph Artist Statement, MAPP International Productions")

Similarly to the Beehive Design Collective, Bamuthi clearly states his intentions to create art that aims to advocate for common people. He also seeks to collaborate between various artists and various media to create work that transcends any one category and is made more powerful by its multi-faceted nature. His work differs from the Beehive and Jordan, however, in its intentional awareness of race issues. Bamuthi says, "The aesthetic is principally non-European or "alt-white," which is to say that I challenge models of classicism from both cultural and environmental perspectives." Thus Bamuthi's work seeks to change cultural norms regarding race by changing its structure from a "white aesthetic" to an "alt-white" aesthetic.

In some ways this goal is similar to the Beehive's goal of subverting the cultural norm of art for profit by creating an alternate structure in which art is made in a democratic and not profit seeking way. Bamuthi's work seeks to change racial

representation and white-dominated communication by embedding values of inclusion of underrepresented voices and alternative aesthetics into the structure of the art itself. In his piece *red, black & GREEN: a blues*, the set is literally made of pieces of dilapidated buildings from the cities whose story it tells: Chicago, Houston, Harlem and Oakland. This set creates a space for specific peoples' stories, pain, and inspiration to be told in a way that is place-based and personal while also addressing much larger moral and social questions.

In addition to creating alternatives to racial and social norms, Bamuthi's work seeks "to create space for ritual magic AS performance, and also ritual magic IN performance" ("Marc Bamuthi Joseph Artist Statement, MAPP International Productions"). Openly claiming magic as part of art is a bold and unusual move for an artist, and one worth examining. 'Magic' hints at the intangible qualities of art that move the spirit as well as the mind, that can move an audience member to tears, that can motivate in ways that statistics or traditional education cannot.

Besides its racial, social and magical elements, in his work Bamuthi's work is about experiential transformation. His mission statement states that he "EXPLICITLY seek[s] to present art that reflects and inspires transformation on personal and collective levels, and that constructs safe space for this transformation to take place" ("Marc Bamuthi Joseph Artist Statement, MAPP International Productions"). Emphasis on transformation is an important aspect of all three of these artists' work that is open to debate and interpretation. What does transformation mean? Is the goal to transform someone's emotions and understanding of an environmental issue? If so, is that enough to

truly promote and spark social change? Is art less effective when it is “explicitly seeks” to transform its audience, as Bamuthi does?

The work of the Beehive Design Collective, Mark Bamuthi Joseph and Chris Jordan shares an intention to represent reality in a more than literal way, inviting emotion and creative thought into the realm of “education.” Many narrative authors share this intention and enact it in their lyrical writing. Terre Satterfield and Scott Slovic’s book, *What’s Nature Worth? Narrative expressions of environmental values*, is comprised of interviews they conducted with various writers to explore narrative methods of expressing environmental values. One of the interviewees is Terry Tempest Williams, a renowned American author and activist whose work explores environmental ethics and human connection to the natural world, especially in the Southwest United States. Her activism has included testifying before the United States Senate regarding land management. In the interview with Williams, titled “Where the Power Lies: Seeking the Intuitive Language of Story,” Satterfield and Slovic describe Williams’ blend of factual and lyrical storytelling, stating,

Williams contrasts the formal language of op-ed columns with the lyrical, mysterious, and even chaotic language of story. The former, she says, can help to open up discussion, but the latter operates in a more powerful and lasting way, inspiring new ways of thinking that emerge from the silence of uncertainty, even perplexity. (63)

While conducting the interview, Satterfield and Slovic invite Williams to speak in a lyrical format, saying they know this is her preferred method of communication. She reacts to their suggestion by accusing them of thinking, “Terry’s not going to be able to articulate in a linear way; we can let her move in the realm of stories and figure it out

later.” She explains that she is frustrated by the assumption that stories must always be ‘analyzed’ and ‘figured out’ if they are to be taken seriously, saying,

...I’m pushing you because that’s exactly what gets set up in these policy meetings...But what I think we are all desperate for as human beings, is a world where there is no separation; it means the integration of the arts with the sciences, so that we’re moving in all these worlds simultaneously. (Satterfield and Slovic 67)

The idea of integrating science and story, and of both being seen as valid, is important for Williams.

She speaks about two pieces of her writing, one of which was a New York Times article prior to a meeting with the Natural Resource Committee that uses “straightforward, pedantic language,” and one of which was from a lyrical piece called Desert Quartet, in which a woman wears a dead frog around her neck and bathes in a river (69). She claims that although more people probably “understood” the former method of testimony, she feels the latter made a greater impact and was more powerful. Williams questions,

Which has had the least effect on public policy? I would say Desert Quartet. Which has had the strongest effect in terms of national policy? The New York Times article...But what was the piece that held the silence? Desert Quartet. What was the piece that was probably least understood? Desert Quartet. Personally, which do I think will have the larger impact? I think it will be the Desert Quartet piece (68-69).

Williams uses disruption and uncertainty as powerful catalysts for imagination. By re-imagining the world and our place in it, lyrical writing can bring us into a place of vulnerability that opens up space for questioning and eventually for transformation.

Williams explains, “What story does is take you out of the realm of what is secure and known. When you enter, you allow chaos to enter” (68). Chaos is a strong word to use,

suggesting the power of disruption. Shaking up the familiar invites new thought and the possibility for transformation, even if such a transformation is uncomfortable.

Williams also invites us to critique which questions are we asking each other regarding policy, claiming that the manner in which questions are asked determines how policy discussions are framed. Williams wants to know,

what questions are being asked around policy tables or dinner tables (which in many ways are the same thing.) And, also, what are the spaces of silence? Are we comfortable in those moments of silence, in reflection? How do we allow for that kind of contemplation, that kind of reflective thinking, so that we are not just giving opinions? Washington is about opinions (68).

For Williams, silence is a powerful tool for being mindful of our own reactions and feelings, and perhaps allowing underlying feelings and thoughts to surface. These deeper thoughts are more meaningful and genuine than ‘opinions,’ which are often crafted and externally motivated rather than arising organically. Her reference to Washington indicates a critique of the insincerity and strategic motivation of most political discourse. She proposes an alternative to speaking about “opinions:”

A much better premise is: Can we care enough about each other to ask evocative questions?...I value the evocative questions. I value the silences. I value someone who listens. I value the ambiguities, the discomfort. In that realm, because of the desperation that gets created, the stories arise. The blood rushes back into the language and rhetoric dissolves (68).

Asking evocative questions is not easy, especially when attempting to find a compromise on a difficult issue such as land conservation, because it can open up more points of contention and varying perspectives rather than leading to consensus.

Williams’ use of the word “desperation” in the above quotation indicates the heated, tense feelings that arise in response to issues such as land conservation, and suggest that these emotions should not be suppressed but aired openly. It is harder to

argue in the realm of feelings and emotions, rather than “hard facts,” and this may be one reason that officials at hearings often request people not to speak about their personal stories. However, Williams argues that although stories may not seem to impact people used to hearing statistics and scientific information, (such as Law School students or scientists,) the effect is still important and meaningful. She describes feeling somewhat “used” when asked to speak at events such as the Nature Conservancy’s annual donor dinner, but also feeling that her reading would have a long-term impact. Williams feels that even when giving a speech to a seemingly non-receptive audience,

Something gets translated, transferred, and they’re touched. Again, it’s the power of story and that’s what we can have ultimate confidence in. It changes the energy. It’s very difficult to talk about crunching numbers after a poem has been read. There has to be a pause. Sometimes the whole world gets turned upside down. The meeting’s discussion takes a different turn (76).

Satterfield summarizes Williams’ idea by saying, “It’s the long distance echo that matters. It comes back to haunt the particular person sitting at that Nature Conservancy table” (76).

At the end of the interview, Williams makes a statement about the role she sees all forms of art playing in our democratic country. She thinks that

literature, art, paintings, dance, and music are offerings for the policy world. These media slow you down and make you think. We, the community of artists, are here—use us! The common point, the edge, actually, is a sense of democracy. There is a fierce sense of democracy in the arts, a freedom of expression. And I think there’s a fierce sense of democracy in policy, too. I really do (77).

Her tone is one of optimism and possibility. The arts can serve as an aid, not a hindrance, to policy creation, and are attempting to further the same goals of inclusion and giving voice that policy, at its best, seeks to fulfill.

Williams' assertion that art is an expression of democracy and can be useful to politics is echoed in Diana Boros' book *Creative Rebellion for the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Public and Interactive Art to Political Life in America*.

Boros explores art's potential to create democratic participation in a society of Americans who increasingly see their role in society as passive consumers rather than as politically engaged and empowered citizens. Boros begins by asking, "What does it take to make people care?" She theorizes that

Being in public outdoor spaces, creating interaction, and reminding participants to be more aware of and empowered over their lives in various ways, all create a desire to care—about yourself, and others, to participate—in public spaces and debates, and ultimately to initiate change in individuals. (Boros xi)

This 'desire to care' is incredibly important in the current political climate in America, in which it is easy to disconnect from the vitality of one's role as a citizen.

Boros argues that one reason for many Americans' lack of political activism is the ability to live with one's basic needs met without having to assert political will. She explains that it is easy for Americans to conclude that "one can be quite comfortable—politically, emotionally, and materially—and "free" without exerting much individual political will" (2). Therefore, the everyday definition of "citizenship" has eroded to mean only the ability to vote. This hands-off approach is highly problematic because Americans have forgotten that they must work to keep democracy. Therefore, Boros encourages the reader to seek solutions to the "the lack of *interest* in public participation" rather than the lack of participation itself. She suggests the power of "sincerity of citizenship" as an alternative to the currently prevailing passivity (3). This "sincerity" is reminiscent of Williams' urging us to ask evocative questions instead of voicing

politically motivated opinions. Like Williams, Boros feels that art is a potent method to achieve this sincerity. Art has the ability to encourage people to care about issues genuinely, and to act in accordance with these genuine feelings.

Given this potential, what forces stop people from acting upon the feelings art evokes? Boros argues that a dominating force working against “sincere citizenship” is capitalism. Capitalism contributes to what Boros sees as the lack of public participation because placing exchange value on goods is a practice that seeps into other aspects of social and political life, including even our valuation of our ideas and identities. Boros argues,

Artistic creation becomes part of a system simply because we live under a capitalism so omnipotent that nothing, not even our own bodies or ideas (our art), escape the value game completely (11).

It is difficult for artistic expression in a capitalist society to avoid becoming commodified and co-opted. Co-option occurs when art that has potential to incite unrest and create change is transformed into a product that can be bought and sold, thereby killing its visionary potential. Boros describes this process as alternative art being “gobbled up by popular culture and spit out as commodities” (4). Boros creates the terms “plastic art” and “visionary art” to help make sense of co-option. “Plastic” art is mainstream, created for profit, and conformist because it becomes redundant, while “visionary art” is transcendent and rebellious, and thus

encourages important political possibilities by reawakening important political possibilities by reawakening (through rearrangement) and engaging (through the critical thought that the rearrangement invites,) a participant (6).

Visionary art seeks to rearrange previous conceptions of the world by joining experienced emotions with rational reflection on those emotions (7).

When “visionary art” becomes co-opted and the majority of art is made only as “plastic art” for profit, art becomes a passive experience of consumption. Boros theorizes that the lack of “visionary art” contributes to a scenario in which Americans do not have to engage with art in the same way they do not have to engage with politics. This is concerning, argues Boros, because “the very nature of American democracy breeds the dangers of a conformist and complacent possessive individualism” (5). Because of the dangers of conformity, lack of critical thought, and political inactivity, creating and witnessing “visionary art” is a political act that is necessary for empowerment.

Art, in Boros’ view, is inherently political because it allows citizens to think critically and to imagine new worlds. Boros claims, “Creating and experiencing art is the only way to move *beyond* physical reality and the limitations of both history and daily life. This has always been art’s power” (23). This power should not be underestimated, for it is precisely this ability to transcend limits of daily life that has ensured the constant presence of art in countless civilizations throughout history. Being able to conceive of a world different to the one you live in ensures that political dominance can never be complete because one can always reach for something better, even if only in the mind. One can always know that the world as it exists now is not the only possibility, and therefore the norms and rules and way of life enforced by the ruling political group are not unchangeable.

Through art we rearrange elements of reality and disorder the familiar, allowing new visions of the world to be born. Because of art’s potential of art to create disorder and chaos, both stories and visual art are ripe with potential to create space for “creative rebellion” (the title of Boros’ book.) Both authors assert that imagination and creativity

are political acts in themselves because they allow citizens to literally re-create reality on their own terms. The following chapters explore these ideas in further depth. The Beehive Design Collective, Mark Bamuthi Joseph and Chris Jordan each offer lenses through which to examine the potential of art to facilitate greater awareness of and connection to environmental issues. As Diana Boros and Terry Tempest Williams help articulate, art is powerful in its capacity to allow viewers to re-imagine the world. This includes re-imagining one's political role and the political structures of a society, re-imagining one's role as a consumer, and re-imagining one's capacity to make change.

Chapter 2: Coming to Terms with Emotion: Chris Jordan's Art as "Despairwork"

A theme running through the work of the Bees, Bamuthi and Chris Jordan is their goal to disrupt normative conceptions of environment and society. Each aims to encourage awareness and fresh perspective. Unfortunately, this new awareness is often comprised mostly of negative, depressing information. Many of the truths these artists seek to bring to light are uncomfortable and disturbing, including the dangers of "greenwashing," the lack of true equality in the United States, the grim realities of environmental racism, and the suffering caused by capitalism and globalization. It is easier to believe that the American ideals of democracy and equality are being realized, and that we live in a meritocracy in which hard work will pay off. It is also comforting to believe that people are working hard for environmental good and that individual consumer choices can really make a difference.

These three artists ask us to let go of such comforting assumptions and step into a critical frame of mind in which it is possible to learn astounding new information, such as the number of homicides in Chicago (Bamuthi), the number of plastic bottles discarded every day (Jordan) or the terrible effects of coal mining on workers' health (Beehive Design Collective). It is also possible in this open-minded and open-hearted mode to *un-learn*, and this is where some of the pain comes in: slipping away from the shores of certainty, swimming out into a sea of unknowns. In this sea, people need something to hold onto.

Chris Jordan's environmental photography invites viewers to feel despair. This is an unusual intention for an artist: not to propose solutions, but to bring the audience to a

place of feeling grief that Jordan believes will lead them to a place of action. His ideology challenges viewers to find their own solutions, to take responsibility onto their own shoulders. When I attended Jordan's presentation at Bates, I felt startled by the vast scale of consumption that his images made harshly apparent. I felt implicated in the cycle of using and discarding objects, realizing that these objects do not simply disappear, they go on to affect the environment in terrible ways after we throw them in the trashcan. Jordan's image of a dead baby bird with its stomach full of plastic has stayed with me ever since. When a student asked at the end of the presentation, "so, what can we do?" Jordan entered into a fascinating discussion in which he challenged the idea of hope. He claimed that hope is passive—it is a way of avoiding action by wishing the situation will improve on its own. Jordan suggested that we not avoid the pain and sadness his images cause, but instead use our pain to recognize the degree to which we care for the natural world, and then act upon this concern ("Encountering Midway"). In considering how to move from grief to a place of empowered action, Johanna Macy, a writer and activist during the Cold War era, has advice to offer.

Johanna Macy's work provides a way to investigate the responses that could arise in response to art that invites and challenges viewers to enter the realm of sadness, doubt, grief and fear. She originally worked on the issue of nuclear weapons, believing that peoples' overwhelming fear of nuclear war paralyzed them from thinking about it, and therefore prohibited them from taking any action to stop it. She, like Chris Jordan, talks explicitly about the necessity of feeling our shared grief. Jordan defines grief as "love for something we have lost or are losing" ("Encountering Midway"). This elegant description implies that grief is not necessarily a negative force that drags us down, but rather can be

a powerful connection to motivating forces of love and compassion. Chris Jordan has in fact presented his work with Joanna Macy at an exhibit in Seattle, pairing his photography with her process of “Despairwork” (“Joanna Macy- Chris Jordan Evening”).

Joanna Macy’s practice called Despairwork seeks to provide a method of discovering, owning and accepting one’s grief and concern for the world, *and then moving through it*. Macy explains that although we fear we will get stuck in our fear, accepting it is in fact freeing:

We tend to fear that if we consciously acknowledge our despair we may get mired in it, incapacitated. But despair like any emotion is dynamic—once experienced it flows through us. It is only our refusal to acknowledge and feel it that keeps it in place. (22)

By making an unknowable, unnamable dark fear within us a fluid part of our awareness, we take away its power to drag us down, instead allowing it to inform and empower our actions.

Macy claims that activism arises out of the desperation of recognizing communal loss. We all feel pain and concern for the future of our world, says Macy, because an enormous shift has occurred in how we perceive future life on the planet. We are no longer able to assume that life will continue indefinitely:

Each [past generation] assumed, without questioning, that its children and children’s children and those yet unborn would carry on—to walk the same earth, under the same sky... That certainty is now lost to us whether we work in the Pentagon or the Peace Movement. That loss, unmeasured and immeasurable, is the pivotal psychological reality of our time. (Macy 2)

Because the feeling of uncertainty that future generations will inhabit the world is “unmeasured and immeasurable,” the loss is difficult to understand and easily becomes subconscious. Also, because many fears for the future are both vaguely defined and massive in scale, it becomes taboo to openly discuss them.

Macy points to three realities that constitute a shared fear for the future: the threat of nuclear war, the progressive destruction of life-support systems in our environment, and the growing misery of half of the planet's people because of poverty and inequality (3). She claims that in response to these threats we feel fear, anger, guilt and sorrow because "confronting so vast and final a loss as this brings sadness beyond the telling" (3). Feeling pain on such a large scale can be overwhelming, depressing and disempowering, and therefore a common response is to try to avoid or deny the pain. We tend to repress this pain and try to live in the present, but Macy argues that we still feel it on other levels of consciousness and emotion because we are deeply interconnected with other people and with the earth. Rather than being individual units,

We are not closed off from the world, but integral components of it, like cells in a larger body. When part of that body is traumatized, we sense that trauma too—in the suffering of fellow-beings, in the pillage of our planet, and even in the violations of future generations. (4)

There are other ways of knowing besides rational and intellectual knowing. In our bodies, and with our intuition, we are capable of experiencing other forms of awareness if we open ourselves to them. Macy argues that even if we do not intentionally listen to these other forms of awareness, we feel anxiety and perhaps even sickness:

When the condition of the larger system falters, sickens, as it is occurring in our present age of exploitation and nuclear technology, the disturbance we feel at a semi-conscious level is acute. Like the impulses of pain in any ailing organism, they serve a purpose, these impulses of pain are warning signals. (4)

When we feel these impulses, it is easy to ignore them because our culture does not consider them a "legitimate" form of knowledge, and in fact often considers them a flaw.

Yet we tend to repress that pain. We block it out because it hurts, because it is frightening, and most of all because we do not understand it and

consider it to be a dysfunction, an aberration, a sign of personal weakness.
(4)

As Terry Tempest Williams suggests, we are taught in our western culture to see emotion and deeper intuitive forms of knowledge as irrelevant and irrational, and therefore to discount the rich and intricate language of our emotional responses. Williams struggled with this de-valuing of emotional awareness when she testified before congress and was told to “leave emotional knowledge out of it.” Because emotion cannot be expressed, we become trapped between understanding intellectually the issues we face, but not processing them emotionally, or as Macy phrases it, “between a sense of impending apocalypse and the fear of acknowledging it. In this “caught” place, our responses are blocked and confused” (5).

This feeling of being caught and confused produces three behaviors: disbelief at the incredible scale and severity of the issues, denial of the devastating emotional reality of the issues, and the experience of living what Macy terms a “double life.” Leading a “double life” means we “lead our lives as if nothing has changed, while knowing that everything has changed” (6). Disbelief, denial and double life lead to total disempowerment and a sort of schizophrenic separation between one’s knowledge and the experience of one’s life. This separation has serious consequences. Macy conducted empowerment workshops across the country with many groups of people, and through listening to their responses to the threat of nuclear warfare she compiled a list of reasons why people repress fears for the future and also what effects this repression has. Among many varied responses, workshop participants listed the following reasons to repress their concern for the planet and the future: fear of pain, fear of appearing morbid, fear of

appearing stupid, fear of guilt, fear of causing distress, fear of appearing unpatriotic, fear of religious doubt, fear of appearing too emotional (9-11.)

It is interesting that so many of the reasons expressed are social ones. It seems that there is monumental pressure not to speak of one's fears because of the effect this outburst would have upon *other people*, such as causing distress say to one's children or loved ones. A related reason for keeping one's emotions private is the fear of *appearing* a certain way that would make one feel alienated from others because of unacceptable behavior. Not being seen as patriotic, not being seen as optimistic, not being seen as religiously devout are all deeply frightening possibilities that make vulnerable one's social identity.

Macy articulates a fear of religious doubt as a state of being "unsure whether God will meet us in the midst of such darkness," that causes us to "hesitate to experience it, lest our faith be shattered or revealed as inadequate" (10). It is easy to understand why most people want to avoid such extreme vulnerability. Similar to religious doubt, people also want to avoid appearing emotional because they are afraid of being "prey to their feelings" (11). This fear has deep cultural roots in centuries of Western, male dominated culture that has "erected a dichotomy between reason and emotion," and values reason above the emotional realm of feelings, sensations and intuitions (11). As we have discussed previously from the perspective of Terry Tempest Williams and Diana Boros, this creative realm has incredible potential that is often suppressed. This separation between the realm of feelings and the realm of rational thought causes us to "discount and discredit our deepest responses to the condition of our world. Dread of nuclear holocaust? Grief for expiring species? Horror for the millions in hunger? Those are "just"

feelings, frequently dismissed in ourselves and in others as self-indulgent, “idealistic” and “irresponsible” (Macy 11).

Perhaps the most powerful reason for repression voiced by participants in Macy’s workshops was fear of feeling powerless. A feeling of powerlessness arises because “When forces are seen as so vast that they cannot be consciously contemplated or seriously discussed, we are doubly victimized—impeded in thought as well as action” (12). Seeking to avoid this overwhelming fear, a vicious cycle occurs in which our fear of experiencing powerlessness is even more powerful than the powerlessness itself, keeping us from acknowledging and working through it. Reasons for this cycle could be cultural norms and expectations such as wanting “ultimate control over our lives” and “to be in charge of our existence and emotions,” which lead to a tendency to “shrink the sphere of our attention to those areas in which we feel we can be in charge” (12). Only by leaning in to the discomfort of confronting the unknown and uncontrollable can we rid ourselves of this narrow focus. Macy challenges us to do so, claiming,

The great pivotal questions of life require us to stand before them in humility—at least for a moment, naked of know-how and shorn of self-assurance. Yet wanting to believe in our power and savvy, we shy from what appears, even temporarily, to threaten them. (12)

Macy’s suggestion that contemplating important questions requires humility and vulnerability deeply challenges our cultural norms. Taught to always be in control of our lives, and taught human supremacy, it is difficult to let go of these assurances. Perhaps that is why letting go is so necessary. Also, it is possible that in this vulnerability comes a sense of relief, because one can release the pressure of knowing all the answers, of needing to be in charge.

Macy explores the ways that repressing any confrontation with these great pivotal questions “takes a mammoth toll on our energies,” asserting that “A marked loss of affect results, as if a nerve had been cut” (12). Many other authors and researchers have also examined the detrimental effects of repressing painful emotion. One such researcher is Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work who “has spent the past decade studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame” (“About Brene Brown”). Her groundbreaking work examines the foundations of shame and how repression of it causes a numbing of other emotions, as well. She has found through her research that people can overcome shame by speaking about it, and in the vulnerability of doing so, find connection with others and empowerment of the self. In her online TED talk entitled “The Power of Vulnerability,” which has received over 12 million views, Brown explains,

The problem is—and I learned this from the research—that you cannot selectively numb emotion. You can't say, here's the bad stuff. Here's vulnerability, here's grief, here's shame, here's fear, here's disappointment. I don't want to feel these. I'm going to have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. (Laughter) I don't want to feel these. (Annotated Captions of Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability in English)

Though it is tempting to ignore pain and hope it will go away, this repression affects all other emotions as well:

You can't numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then we are miserable, and we are looking for purpose and meaning, and then we feel vulnerable, so then we have a couple of beers and a banana nut muffin. And it becomes this dangerous cycle. (Annotated Captions of Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability in English)

Brown, like Macy, calls attention to patterns of avoidance and denial that are normal in American culture. Both authors also claim that avoidance has dangerous affects,

including shutting off our ability to feel emotion, both positive and negative. Macy calls this process of ignoring pain “anesthetization,” and says it “affects other aspects of our life as well—loves and losses are less intense, the sky less vivid—for if we are not going to let ourselves feel pain, we will not feel much else either” (Macy 12). Allowing emotion to affect us is necessary not only in order to allow us to respond to global crises, but also to experience all aspects of life more fully and richly.

In addition to anesthetization, Macy suggests that other side effects of repression include fragmentation and alienation, because we create an internal split between what we know and how we act (13). We also develop “secret shame” for having negative feelings, causing us to question our *own* sanity, rather than society’s sanity (13). Other affects of repression include displacement activities, political passivity, and a sense of powerlessness that eventually leads to burn-out (15-17). A sense of powerlessness occurs when “...we choose the role of victim before attempting to organize and change the situation—before even engaging with it” (16). Burn-out can arise from feeling that “we carry a heavy burden of knowledge” when we begin to view our agony for that knowledge as counterproductive and weak (16). Despairwork, then, is Macy’s attempt to fill an important need to free our creative energies:

Just as grief-work is a process by which bereaved persons unblock their numbed energies by acknowledging and grieving the loss of a loved one, so do we all need to unblock our feelings about our threatened planet and the possible demise of our species. Until we do, our power of creative responses will be crippled (18).

Despairwork arose from Macy’s workshops, where she and the participants experienced “a readiness to face the dark and take that darkness into us” and a recognition that “this pain for our world, like pain for the loss of a loved one, is a measure of caring” (18).

Macy quotes C.G. Jung's words, "There is no birth of consciousness without pain" (Jung in Macy 19). Therefore, our capacity to grieve determines our capacity to change and to expand our awareness. Suffering is "a mode of becoming," "a rite of passage" (Macy 19). Seeing emotional suffering as an important method of expanding oneself counters many dominant societal norms, including the perception of feeling pain as admitting weakness, and the desire for instant solutions to problems.

Chris Jordan's artwork offers a way to experience the emotional process that Macy advocates. Jordan explicitly states that his work aims to provoke an emotional response, but not necessarily to provide solutions to the problems it raises. Though this approach draws criticism from some viewers, Jordan does not apologize for his approach. He explains his reasoning for not attempting to provide easy answers by saying,

when we reflect on a difficult question in the absence of an answer, our attention can turn inward, and in that space may exist the possibility of some evolution of thought or action. So my hope is that these photographs can serve as portals to a kind of cultural self-inquiry. It may not be the most comfortable terrain, but I have heard it said that in risking self-awareness, at least we know that we are awake. ("An Abiding Ocean of Love: A Conversation with Chris Jordan")

Like Macy's *Despairwork*, Jordan's photography is a means of accessing one's own emotions and through those emotions finding truth, finding motivation, finding direction.

The experience of viewing Jordan's photography in a gallery reflects the experience of coming to terms with one's pain. Walking into a gallery, one would likely be struck first by the immensity of the scale of the image, and simultaneously by its beauty. However, as one approaches one of his photos, it becomes apparent that the beautiful image is disguising a dark and troubling reality. We would rather not see the

image as made of bottle caps, it is nicer to see it as a wave. But in seeing the bottle caps, we see the whole picture as it is intended. The beauty of the world and the terrible grief of it are overlaid together in one frame.

In an interview with Lisa Bennett of the Ecoliteracy Center titled “An Abiding Ocean of Love,” Jordan discusses the power of combining tragedy and beauty:

There is nothing quite like beauty. When you bring beauty and grief together, you can't look at it, because it's so sad—and you can't look away, because it's so beautiful. It's a moment of being transfixed and the key is turned in the lock. (“An Abiding Ocean of Love: A Conversation with Chris Jordan”)

Jordan's own process of creating art for activism has been one of bringing his appreciation for beauty and his experience of grief together. He started photographing piles of garbage for their vibrancy and variety of color. When he would show the work to friends and colleagues, many would comment on the environmental messages they found in the images. Though he resisted at first, claiming that that was not “the point” of his art, he eventually embraced his identity as an environmental photographer as opposed to a “straight” photographer.

In his earlier “Running the Numbers” exhibit, Jordan creates portraits of mass-consumption by bringing to life statistics such as the number of plastic water bottles Americans consume every five minutes. In the interview with Lisa Bennett, Jordan says he feels

a little discontented with my “Running the Numbers” work because what I really want to do is help people like your son understand that these global issues are personal to each one of us. My “Running the Numbers” work is inherently abstract, conceptual art. (“An Abiding Ocean of Love: A Conversation with Chris Jordan”)

Jordan seems to feel that when created on such a large scale, using such a conceptual approach, his work is limited in its ability to achieve his underlying goal of provoking an emotional response. He continues, “[“Running the Numbers”] points in the right direction, but what I’m really interested in is feeling. That’s the power of art. It reminds you how you feel about something” (“An Abiding Ocean of Love: A Conversation with Chris Jordan”).

While his “abstract” pieces provide a way to conceptualize issues with the full weight of their scale and implications, Jordan also seeks to create more personal connections between viewer and art, to make his images hit closer to home. When he traveled to Midway Island in the Pacific in an attempt to photograph the Pacific Gyre, a mass of garbage that is twice the size of Texas, he was disappointed to find that the garbage was largely underwater and invisible to his camera lens. However, what he *could* see on the island was more powerful for Jordan than the massive amount of garbage beneath the surface. He saw countless bodies of albatross birds whose stomachs were filled with plastic. The plastic had made its way from our garbage bags into the ocean, where albatross mothers mistook it for food and fed it to their babies. The corpses of the birds are filled with plastic items that are easily recognizable products we use every day; a gruesome reminder that our actions have consequences.

Jordan himself experienced a spiritual and emotional low, feeling devastated by the sadness of what he was seeing, but feeling it important to bear witness. However, as he kept working and exploring the magnitude of his sorrow, “The experience began to evolve from witnessing tragedy to falling in love, and the tragedy began to be wrapped in this envelope of grace and elegance and beauty. That was the bigger story” (“An Abiding

Ocean of Love: A Conversation with Chris Jordan”). Jordan realized that in place of sadness, he felt love:

I came to discover that grief is not sadness. Grief is love. Grief is a felt experience of love for something lost or that we are losing. That is an incredibly powerful doorway. I think we all carry that abiding ocean of love for the miracle of our world. And if, on a collective level, we could grieve together and rediscover that deeper part of our collective psyche, then healing the symptoms of that disconnect could happen much faster than we imagine (“An Abiding Ocean of Love: A Conversation with Chris Jordan”).

Here Jordan’s words are reminiscent of Macy’s in bringing together love on a personal level with love for the world as a whole. His words also echo her idea of disconnection of ourselves from the rest of humanity and the rest of the community of life, and the terrible harm this disconnection causes. Seeing grief as a deep form of sadness that should be avoided is paralyzing. Changing our perspective to seeing grief as an “incredibly powerful doorway” to accessing the deep compassion and connectedness we feel for the rest of the world has incredible potential to spark activism. Both Macy and Jordan help us see that if we view grieving as a healthy and natural process, we can unblock ourselves and find energy and inspiration to care for ourselves and our world.

Chapter 3: The Political Potential of Marc Bamuthi Joseph's Art

Marc Bamuthi Joseph identifies himself as “a seeker” (“Artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph on Hybridity”). He recognizes that in today’s world, this title links him in peoples’ minds to either “Harry Potter or the Buddha,” but dreams of a day when his hybridity as an activist/dancer/poet/educator will be understood and celebrated. His identity and his work are vitalized by multiple, intersecting dimensions. Bamuthi grew up in Queens, New York, the son of Haitian immigrants, and performed on Broadway at a young age. He graduated from Morehouse College and graduate program, from which his father hoped he would gain qualifications to become a lawyer.

However, Bamuthi’s path has led in many other directions. He excels as a slam poet, winning the National Poetry Slam crown on the San Francisco team at age 24 (“Marc Bamuthi Joseph: Legacy”). He also dazzles as a dancer in styles from hip-hop, which surrounded him growing up, to the Senegalese National Ballet. Bamuthi claims that “at heart, I am a tenth grade English teacher” (Donohue). His passion for education expresses itself in a plurality of ways, from teaching in a classroom to his work for the organization YouthSpeaks, which empowers under-privileged youth through spoken word poetry. He also educates in a less direct way through a series of one-day eco-festivals he started in 2009 called “Life is Living.” These events take place in under-utilized parks, encouraging community and empowerment in the context of environmental action.

Hybridity for Bamuthi means more than wearing many hats professionally. It also means a deep commitment to recognizing the interconnected nature of aspects of life that are often conceptualized as separate. Bamuthi’s work shows how politics are

interconnected with race relations, how urban black violence influences environmentalism, how belief in “green” is inseparable from belief in community and belief in life, even in desolate places. Bamuthi’s art aims to create “multiple points of access” to environmental and social justice issues, and its hybridity makes this possible. Poetry, dance, rhythms, songs, symbolic use of props and physical structures all act as doorways into the questions, dramas and characters of the piece.

Bamuthi speaks of his personal struggle to explain his artistic identity in a way that is culturally acceptable. He realizes that this “ongoing naming ceremony” he and other hybrid artists go through is “an aberrant comedy of errors on a micro level, but it speaks to the macro economics of a market-driven society increasingly obsessed with brand and acutely funneled demographic audiences” (“Artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph on Hybridity”). This economic structure means that, “For the hybrid artist there is a nebulous space between integrity, innovation, and paying the rent that is directly tied to one’s capacity to “sell” our wares” (“Artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph on Hybridity”). He lists examples of practical complications that arise from his interdisciplinary work, such as what section of the newspaper his work should be advertised under or what grants he can apply for. However, he does not apologize for such inconvenience.

His work goes beyond easy categorizations, partially because it is not only focused on what is performed onstage, but also upon the relationship of the performers to the audience and what is transmitted between them. His work is based on an experience as much as a product, intimately connected to the audience in the room:

I believe that in my field, at the end of the day, there is a cultural intelligence and there is animal intelligence...the reaction to proximity and scent...the access and opportunity to perform gaze...the gathering of bodies in dark places to commune around ideas...to see oneself borne out

in flesh and blood and metaphor...human impulse...animal intellect...I think the audience is always subject, the performed object ultimately less interesting than what the people do with it. (“Artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph on Hybridity”)

Bamuthi’s description of “the gathering of bodies in dark places to commune around ideas” brings to mind images of rituals shared by a community. Indeed, Bamuthi’s work at times seems to take on a ritualistic character, such as in his play *red, black & GREEN: a blues*, when he pours water between glass bowls, offering the audience watermelon from the window of the set, and singing in a call and response pattern together as audience and performers. Bamuthi’s art is committed to creating “multiple points of access,” a practice deeply rooted in a belief that when we compartmentalize, we fail to understand issues in their complexity and therefore fail to address them in meaningful or lasting ways. Bamuthi feels that compartmentalizing ecological and social responsibility “creates a false dichotomy that might best be solved by bringing the issues back to a human scale” (Hurwitt). In many ways, Bamuthi attempts to make complex issues relatable and personal. Coordinating and hosting one-day festivals called “Life is Living” in under-resourced parks, working for the organization “YouthSpeaks” dedicated to teaching poetry to youth, and performing on more formal stages are all ways of relating issues to peoples’ lives.

Bamuthi partnered with other artists to create a play that includes dance, song, theater, video, and spoken word poetry called *red, black & GREEN: a blues*. This play takes place in four cities: New York, Houston, Chicago and Oakland, and tells many stories of environmentalism and social justice in these communities. The play’s website summarizes the performance by stating, “*red, black & GREEN: a blues (rbGb)* is visceral

and moving hybrid performance work that brings the stories and voices of Black America into the center of a timely conversation about race, class, culture and the environment” (“Red, Black & GREEN: A Blues- Marc Bamuthi Joseph”). The play is a collaboration between many artists, some of whom specialize in vocal and instrumental music, some of whom specialize in theater or dance, some of whom are videographers and set designers.

The product of this collaboration is a multi-layered, multi-media experience that is powerful and moving in its honesty, its varied perspectives, and its captivating energy. In an interview, Bamuthi explains that *red, black & GREEN: a blues* is about expanding normative conceptions of what it means to ‘go green.’ He says rbGb brings “humanity and soul into the ‘green’ conversation” and that the artists hope to inspire self-reflection in the audience (Sewing.) This self reflection occurs by realizing connections, rather than boundaries. Bamuthi states, “I want people to see that we are all reflected in the environment. It’s so easy to associate ‘green’ with things, like recycling, solar panels and water conservation. It’s a dissolution of the boundary between ‘green’ things and people” (Sewing). Dissolving such boundaries is difficult because of the exclusion Bamuthi and others feel as a result of the predominately white, middle class leadership of the environmental movement.

Bamuthi’s inspiration for creating rbGb derived from “his frustration with the lack of brown voices in the struggle over environmental justice, social ecology, sustainable energy, and climate change, and our collective responsibility for such issues. rbGb is meant to bring these voices into the dialogue” (“Marc Bamuthi Joseph- Open Field”). Because of the dominance of one perspective on what “green” means, the agenda of “environmentalism” becomes limited and exclusive. Bamuthi gives many

examples of ways the green movement is limited by its narrow goals and priorities, such as when he as a young activist created “eco-festivals” to “green the ghetto,” but realized that he was projecting his own views onto others rather than truly bringing the black community into the green conversation on its own terms.

When Bamuthi realized that the issue of involving the black community in the green movement was more complicated than putting on a flashy festival and preaching his beliefs, he sought other methods for achieving his goals. He realized that an important step in reaching his intended audience was to re-conceptualize environmentalism and broaden its definition. His shift in perspective is symbolized in the transition of names for the festivals from “eco-festival” to “life is living festival.” The entirety of his play “red, black & GREEN: a blues” tells the story of this transition. As a reviewer of the piece points out, this shift from “what is sustainable” to “what sustains life” “could be an important shift for the green movement—one that would reactivate the choir and provide an entry point for people just coming to the green movement” (Donohue). The festivals are “a national series of one-day festivals designed to activate under-resourced parks and affirm peaceful urban life through hip hop arts and focused environmental action” (“Red, Black & GREEN: A Blues- Marc Bamuthi Joseph”). Because of their accessibility and location in outdoor public spaces, these festivals embody principles of democratization and inclusion.

After two gatherings of organizers of Life is Living in New York and Chicago, Jeff Chang, one of the organizers, wrote a paper on “A Living Theory of Change,” chronicling the process of creating the Life is Living festivals and the shifts in approach and philosophy that have occurred along the way and made the festival as successful and

influential as it is. The paper reflects on the non-profit arts sector of which Life is Living is a part, claiming that part of its strength is its innovation and ability to reach audiences in meaningful ways that create significant impact. Around the time that Life is Living festivals began, non-profit performing arts organizations were struggling with questions of how to “deepen their relationships with the communities they serve,” think about “audience development,” and “interface with institutions to produce high quality aesthetics and social outcomes” (“A Living Theory of Change” 3). The group came up with the innovative idea of the “creative ecosystem” as a basis for planning and implementing festivals.

The “creative ecosystem” is a process that “takes into account the various actors in a community, their roles and their strengths. It then activates curiosity, inquiry, and play as it engages those actors to ply their unique perspectives toward community-wide problem or set of problems” (“A Living Theory of Change” 8). Chang then quotes Hodari Davis, who says, “It’s a celebration of practices that already exist. It’s not about bringing a movement into a community. It’s more about bringing the community into a movement.” (Davis in “A Living Theory of Change” 8). In practice, this means relying more on community-driven change than on change fueled by government policy.

Life is Living often spearheads the formation of creative ecosystems that outlast the one-day festival, for example education programs that begin long before the festival takes place or participatory murals that are made during a festival and then permanently placed in the community. Thus the festivals bring to life systems of connection that are already present in communities: “The creative ecosystem already exists, if largely dormant. Life is living creates the parameters by which the ecosystem is made aware of

itself, and through which new collaboration can be forged” (“A Living Theory of Change” 9). In bringing these creative ecosystems forward in such vibrant, celebratory ways, the festivals affirm life in these communities, recognizing that seemingly dangerous parks are often *under-resourced*, not under-utilized—for the communities they serve, these parks are centers of activity.

In her book *Creative Rebellion for the 21st Century*, Political Science Professor Diana Boros advocates for the necessity of art projects like Life is Living. She claims that

Being in public outdoor spaces, creating interaction, and reminding participants to be more aware of and empowered over their lives in various ways, all create a desire to care—about yourself, and others, to participate—in public spaces and debates, and ultimately, to initiate change in individuals. (Boros xi)

Public art is powerful in its capacity to cultivate civic engagement, and especially effective because it reaches a wide audience. Its being accessible is important because “That art is in the public means that it reaches more people more often, and it often reaches people who may not normally seek out art. Thus public art is a democratizing factor on experience with creativity and innovation” (xii). Boros’ ideals are enacted in Bamuthi’s work through its accessibility and through its emphasis on empowering individuals to care about and positively change their local communities.

Boros calls work such as Bamuthi’s “socially engaged art” because it invites citizens to participate in society in an unusual way. Participating in society *at all* is sadly unusual in current American society—it is easy to be complacent and only exercise one’s political voice on Election Day, if even then. However, in order to feel a more sustained and regular connected with one’s community and country, it is necessary to feel like a co-participant in some form of action or shared experience. Boros states,

a feeling of connectivity is inherently participatory. This interest is the first part of participation. To encourage participation first in our own lives, and then in public life, the role of art, and particularly in public or otherwise participatory art, should not be underestimated. (xiv)

Bamuthi's *rbGb* encourages feelings of connectivity and participation in its very structure. The play begins with the audience being welcomed onstage with the actors, walking around the set, eating watermelon slices Bamuthi hands out, watching the speed of the drummer's fingers and the strength of the dancers' muscles as they spin right next to the onlookers. As the audience takes their seats, the cast sings "I've got peace like a river" and then invites the audience to sing it back, in a beautiful call and response that makes physical the connection between the community of people in the room, and creates an intimacy that stays throughout the play.

As one review of the play described it, "The first section of the performance thus begins with the audience mere inches from the artists. At such close range, we are reminded that we are not mere onlookers of the performance nor of life" (Wolins). This intimacy sets a precedent for the rest of the play, in which "audience members are consistently connected as participants of a critical discussion in a new light: how do we sustain the human race? What role do cultural roots and history play? And who is responsible for this task?" (Wolins). The play is able to open up these emotionally stirring questions because of its inclusion of the audience in the conversation.

rbGb does not only present problems and solutions, but presents the multiple dimensions and sometimes despairingly difficult nature of problems and suggests solutions in broad terms that are open to interpretation. In its conversational, intimate structure, the play also asks the audience to ponder the issues presented in their own minds and hearts. Throughout the play, seeds are a recurring metaphor—Bamuthi cuts

and distributes watermelon in the beginning of the play, a mother whom he speaks to during the play talks about black youth and violence and spits out a black seed, there is a scene involving a community garden, and a question “what would grow here?” that resounds throughout the work. This metaphor reflects the way the play aims to plant seeds of awareness, of empathy, of belief and hope, in the audience’s minds and hearts. Bamuthi and his cast seem to feel no need to control or dictate how these seeds will grow, how the audience will grapple with what they have seen, or what doors to emotional vulnerability have been opened. They seem to trust that the audience’s experience will lead somewhere, whether it is towards personal growth, or towards create outward growth in one’s community. The ritual of the play; the awakening of feelings, awareness, new insights, new sadness, new joy, is a catalyst for change outside of the sacred space of the theater. The play takes on new life, expands outward through each person who has witnessed and participated in its magic.

Diana Boros would likely describe Bamuthi’s play as transformative; a quality she feels is essential to revolutionary art:

Transformation is key to art. In transformation, there is change from one to another, and in that temporary disorder, there is liberation. In that liberation, the individual becomes more aware and knowledgeable about oneself and one’s relationship to the world, and in that gains interest in others. (Boros xiv)

Boros implies that disordering familiar narratives frees up the mind to conceive of new ideas and fresh awareness regarding truths that have previously been unquestioned or seen as unchangeable. Bamuthi’s artist statement declares, “I EXPLICITLY seek to present art that reflects and inspires transformation on personal and collective levels, and that constructs safe space for this transformation to take place” (“Red, Black & GREEN:

A Blues- Marc Bamuthi Joseph”). Both *rbGb* and *Life is Living* exemplify this approach through their participatory structure, their emotional poignancy and honesty, and their persistent questioning and challenging of oppressive cultural norms.

Boros also points out that experiencing art in public, participatory spaces such as Bamuthi’s festivals create promotes civic engagement:

Individual experience with creativity and arts has been shown to lead to higher rates of civic engagement, and to an increased interest in public life as well as empowerment in one’s own personal life. Artistic experience, especially powerful and frequent experience, enables access to an inherent but latent spirit of community that exists within all individuals...this like demonstrates the utility of employing art as a tool to encourage political participation. (Boros 5)

Here Boros offers a directly utilitarian reason for art—its tendency to increase political activism. Though Bamuthi’s work may not explicitly seek to inspire political participation, it definitely seeks to inspire community participation. These may sometimes be one and the same, but also Bamuthi’s approach seems to suggest that activism *outside* the political system can be more effective because it is not reliant upon a governmental system that is often prejudiced and racist, and therefore exclusionary towards black communities. Underlying both of these approaches to activism, however, is a commitment to sustaining life, which forms the foundation of both *Life is Living* and *rbGb*. Emphasizing life is a democratizing choice because it allows everyone to participate in the conversation.

“What sustains life?” asks Bamuthi many times throughout *rbGb*. His choice to form the question this way mirrors his emphasis on expanding conceptions of “environmentalism” to reflect a wider array of issues that are inclusive of lower-class and minority communities. In an interview he states, “When it comes to what sustains life,

everyone has an answer... The question of the environment is not about solar panels or polar bears, it's about people and their practices. The morbid truth is that the planet will be here even if we're not, but what are we doing to sustain life?" (Hurwitt). This approach is innovative because it places emphasis on a spectrum of daily activities, of basic necessities, of local communities. It affirms the need for peaceful community life as the starting place of environmentalism, and recognizes that when underprivileged people and places are not respected, environmentalism cannot be a priority. He expresses this idea poignantly in a line of spoken word poetry from the play: "I ask a mother about environment./ She tells me of guns/ of emotionally disabled boys" (Donohue). This scene in the play continues with the mother spitting out a black watermelon seed and asking Bamuthi, "what would grow here?"

These two questions, one hopeful: "what sustains life in your community?" and the despairing: "what would grow here?" come together to articulate the resounding optimism and outrage within the play. Outrage arises over the high rates of violent crime, disregard for public spaces, lack of opportunity in education and jobs, and lack of governmental care or support for black neighborhoods. As Bamuthi questions, "How can you join the green movement when you don't have access to the proper foods to nourish your children?" (Sewing). Another question worth asking is, why isn't food accessibility part of the mainstream environmental movement? Why do goals of the movement give less priority to healthy food access in inner cities than to saving distant wilderness or promoting electric cars? Bamuthi answers these questions by saying, "The reality is you can't go green until you hold a respect for life and can focus on tomorrow. Let's start

there” (Sewing). He suggests that what is necessary is an increased understanding of what constitutes “environment” and what issues affect people most directly.

The brilliant twist to rbGb’s dialogue is that it does not suggest the environmental movement is empty, useless and elitist, but instead suggests that the green movement could benefit from black participation and also that the black community could benefit from embracing environmentalism. This embrace could take the form of investing in making black and other underprivileged communities safe, sustainable, and vibrant with access to education, healthy food, and open spaces for social gatherings and recreation. These changes occur both internally, by people caring about the place they live, and externally from government support and the elimination of structural racism’s oppressive effects.

During the process of creating *red, black & GREEN: a blues*, a documentary filmmaker made a series of short videos that display aspects of the creative process. In the first video, *Belief*, Theaster Gates describes his practice of art-making and set-building by saying, “Believing *is* architecture. Believing *is* urban planning. Believing *is* engagement. Believing *is* breathing” (“Red, Black & GREEN: A Blues BELIEF”).

He explains,

Belief in advance of any particular material is the beginning of my practice. The material output is just a by-product of belief. My investment in abandoned buildings, in dancing or song, in a studio project, studio practice, starts with believing that materials have redemptive quality, that poor places have redemptive qualities, that someone has to believe in the poor (“Belief” video).

This rhetoric echoes lyrics from a song sung in the play: “Belief is Black, belief, belief, Belief is Black, keep on believing.”

Gates' linkage between belief manifested in urban planning and infrastructure and belief in the resilience and redemption of the black community is a powerful example of the bridges this play creates between its onstage world and the lived experience it represents. A set built of abandoned or recycled materials is more than just a symbolic gesture or a visual device; it is a physical embodiment of the play's message. The message is not based in abstract, idealistic, "hope," a term often used by the Green movement, but "belief," which implies faith that an outcome *will* occur. Though Gates is not sure that the pieces he finds will build a set, his belief makes the pieces come to life through a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Similarly, he argues, believing in black communities, both from within and from without, will ensure their flourishing. Even if the communities are rough, broken and visually ugly, as are the materials from which he builds his set, they have redemptive qualities. Belief is something to hold onto in the face of incredible despair, such as the murder of young black men due to inner-city violence born of desperation. Bamuthi asks in one of his spoken word poems in *rbGb*, "see how dark the day becomes when you bury the son?" If communities can hold onto a belief in green, in life, through the darkest times, perhaps they can manifest the better reality they believe in. And if these communities believe in themselves, perhaps they will demand and receive better support, respect and investment from external forces such as government.

Jamal Ali, an advertiser, marketer, and activist, wrote a book exploring the intersection of black communities and environmentalism called "Black and Green: black insights for the green movement." This book fleshes out the idea mentioned above that the green movement could be enlivened and strengthened by the black community's

involvement, and vice versa. Ali takes a step-by-step approach to environmental issues, looking at what makes each difficult for the black community to address and also what achievable steps could be taken to change perceptions and behavior. Ali opens his preface by describing the compounding factors that keep black communities entrenched in poverty:

Malcolm X once said that when you live in a poor neighborhood, you attend a poor school. When you attend a poor school, you get a poor education. With a poor education, you can only get a poor paying job. With a poor paying job, you can only live in a poor neighborhood—so it's a vicious cycle (Ali vii).

He goes on to list problems plaguing black communities, including gun violence, unemployment, gangs, high highschool dropout rates, obesity and other health problems, and recognizes that it may seem “quite a stretch to introduce saving the environment, or “going green” as a possible solution for many of our problems,” however, he proceeds to do exactly this throughout his book (Ali vii).

His method for motivating his community to go green starts on the local, community level, similar to Bamuthi's emphasis on small, localized environmental action. Ali reflects, “I decided that if I was going to make the case for why Black people should embrace the green movement, I needed to bring it to the local level, in a way that could break the cycle.” (viii). He lists several reasons why black people should go green, including reduction in crime, job creation, health, and money saving. He also feels that in order to fully integrate a green mentality in the black community, it will need to be “perceived as cool,” and he even imagines a time when slang words such as “2Green or “Phat Green” would be heard on the streets (Ali ix).

Bamuthi's Life is Living festivals also strive for this goal, and feature many events that celebrate cool, youth-led activities such as graffiti, skateboarding, and hip-hop rap and dance. In "A Living Theory of Change," Jeff Chang writes of the power of celebrating these aspects of urban black life that are often stigmatized, stating,

From a sociohistorical point-of-view, the Estria [Graffiti] Battles are a powerful corrective. Competition among graffiti writers has sometimes turned violent. The artform is still stigmatized as a gateway crime into neighborhood annihilation. Yet these events show graffiti to be an artform that celebrates creativity, interconnectedness, community, and life. ("A Living Theory of Change")

It is difficult, as Ali points out, to make "green" acceptable and exciting to marginalized people, which is why Bamuthi's approach is so exciting.

Dynamic, visionary, challenging, inclusive, disruptive, empowering, progressive, embodied, Bamuthi's work takes ideas and puts them into practice. Bamuthi's work is political in affirming life in places the political system chooses to ignore. Bamuthi's identity as a hybrid artist disrupts easy categorization and compartmentalization.

Bamuthi's art *is* activism.

Thesis Chapter 4: The Beehive Design Collective and Theories of Art and Visual Culture Education

The Beehive Design Collective is a group of artists, activists and community organizers whose “beehive” is located in Machias, Maine, but whose “cross-pollination” affects people across the Americas. The Bees, as they call themselves, spend a great deal of time on the road, “sharing their work through interactive, image-based workshops and presentations” (Stewart). Their work centers on issues of environmental and social justice, and uses an innovative, community based approach to convey messages through large cloth murals drawn by hand by members of the collective. They distribute images of their murals in the form of paper posters as they tour and present. The Beehive gathers their stories by living in communities, listening to stories of people directly affected by issues of globalization, environmental destruction and political oppression, and witnessing both the problems and the active solutions that their posters convey. The Bees call themselves “word-to-image translators of complex global stories, shared with us through conversations with affected communities” (“Who We Are: Beehive Design Collective”). This self-identification as ‘translators’ is part of the Beehive’s general approach to their art as a creative process of which they are part, rather than a product they create and own.

Mandy Skinner, one of the members of the Beehive, (all of whom refer to themselves as “the Bees,”) explains the history of the Beehive in an interview. She states that the Beehive Design Collective began in 2000 “and grew out of the energy of the anti-globalization movement and the mass protests against large financial institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank”(Stewart). In the past, the Beehive has

worked in North, South and Central America on various issues, starting with globalization and resource extraction. They usually take years to complete a graphic campaign project, which involves living with the affected community and gathering information, researching and observing plants and animals native to the area to decide which will best represent the characters they wish to portray, and making mind-maps of all the interconnecting issues that their posters convey. The mind maps are then used as a basis for the drawing, which is a collaborative process among many artists (see Figure 1).

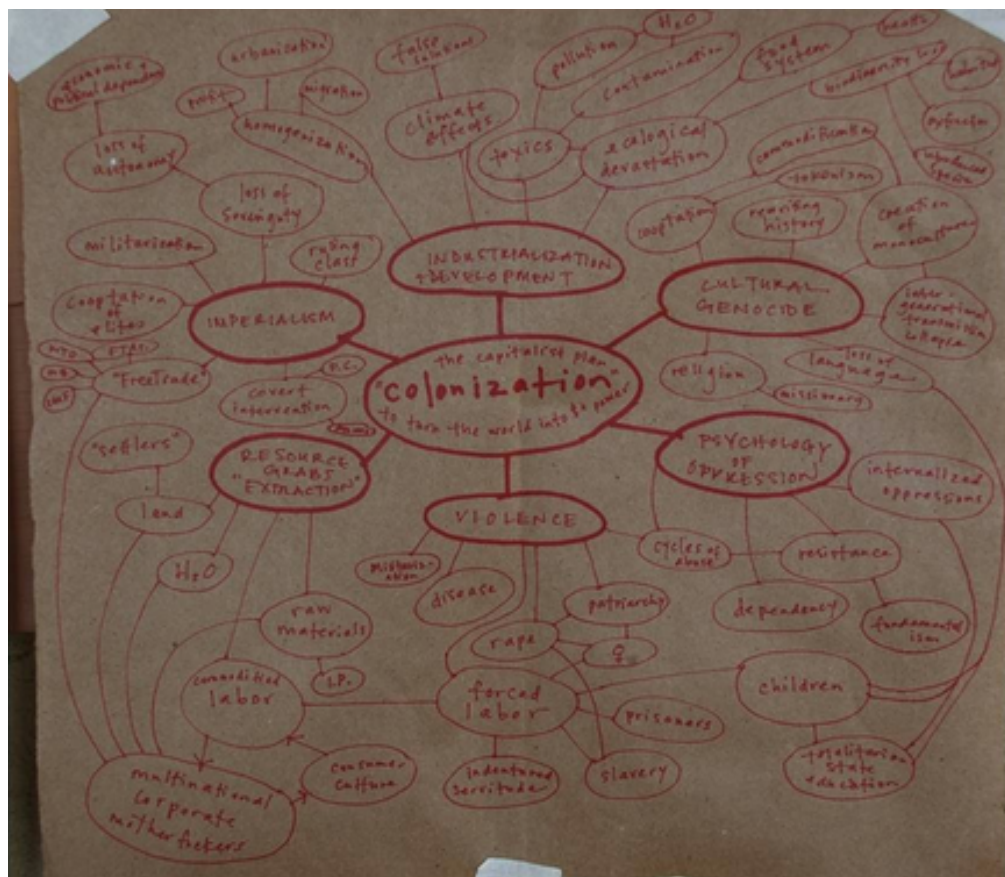


Figure 1. Beehive Mind Map

Mind maps are the Beehive’s method of collective brainstorming. The map pictured above shows ideas gathered from research on a listening trip in Latin America. As the map shows, the Bees conceptualize issues in their broadest dimensions, drawing

connections between seemingly unconnected actors, incidents, and trends. For example, this mind map considers “psychology of oppression” and “cultural genocide” effects of the “colonialism” of capitalism along with more concrete or obvious effects such as “resource extraction” (Figure 1). The mind map is an innovative way to conceive of a story that impacts the way the Bees translate the information they have gathered into visual artwork.

With mind maps in place to understand mega-trends and connections, the Bees can move on to envisioning metaphors with which to tell the story. On their website the Bees explain, “Once a storyline is built, we begin the process of “metaphor pushups,” translating the stories we’ve collected into images that are complex enough to honor and represent the real life situations” (“What We Do: Beehive Design Collective”). Part of this metaphor-making process involves choosing animals to take the place of people. The Beehive intentionally chooses to use plants and animals that are native to whatever region their poster depicts, for the express purpose “to avoid stereotypes” (Stewart).

Usually at any one time the Beehive Collective consists of between ten and fifteen core members, with many other peripheral members and supporters. These artists work together to create the artwork, and do not take credit for the art as individuals, but credit it to the collective (Stewart). This choice exemplifies the Beehive’s approach to their work and the stories they tell: it is communal, it is shared, it is ‘for the commons.’ The stories their posters convey do not belong to the Beehive or any individual Bee, they are to be spread and shared. Emily, another member of the Beehive, says in interview, “We shepherd stories, steward them, sculpt them, but they are not ours in a proprietary way—they are ours to share, not to own” (Horvitz). The Beehive’s practices embody the

principle of free sharing through their “anti-copyright” approach, meaning they do not restrict usage of their images, but in fact encourage people to use their art for educational purposes. They also distribute posters and patches at all of their events, collecting sliding-scale donations in exchange.

The Beehive aims to “cut out the constant queries of ‘who made that?’ and ‘how much does it cost?’ from our creative process” (“Who We Are: Beehive Design Collective”). This lack of personal ownership or attachment to their work, combined with their not-for-profit model of production is quite different from most artists within the capitalist system. The Beehive subverts cultural norms and questions power structures not only in their visual art, but also in the ways they operate and the values they live by. By asserting that people can live collectively and create artwork communally, and that the art does not have to belong exclusively to the artist, the Beehive enacts an alternative, anti-capitalist culture that its graphics promote.

The graphic campaigns are meant to empower, educate, and to question dominant cultural narratives. By residing in the world of story and metaphor, the Beehive’s artwork allows viewers to understand and feel the impact of the issue at stake on more-than-conscious levels. Like other environmental art this thesis has examined, its power lies in the more-than-literal, the emotional impact and the linkages that images allow our brains and bodies to recognize. In the case of the Beehive’s art, scenes that may have little emotional impact if stated as facts suddenly take on new meanings when represented in images of animals. For example, the “Mesoamerica Resiste!” graphic features a scene that tells the story of women’s resistance to military and paramilitary violence in their communities (see figure 2). These stories would be moving in

themselves because of the women’s bravery, but are made more moving by the visual representation of female animals with self-defense techniques such as a praying mantis who bites the head off of her opponent, a boar who snarls fiercely and a slug who chokes her aggressor. In their informational write-up about this poster, the Beehive explains,

Each character is using her natural defenses, like the porcupine who has shot her quills into the face of the plainclothes paramilitary. Women and children put themselves at the front lines during countless standoffs between armed forces and unarmed civilians in defense of their communities. (Mesoamerica Resiste! Narrative 13)



Figure 2. Detail image from “Mesoamerica Resiste!” 2013

In addition to its unusual use of animal and plant metaphors, the Beehive’s work differs from many other art mediums because of the venues in which it is displayed. In a promotional video, the Beehive states, “we’re into taking art out of the gallery, and out of the museum, and into places where you might not expect to find it” (“Hatch the Beehive's Epic Story-Graphic”). By making art readily accessible and integrating it into other

aspects of culture, the Beehive democratizes the audience who can be impacted by their art and its message.

Another way in which the Beehive embodies principles of democratization occurs through the Beehive's method of conveying stories in their art, which they call graphics campaigns. Their process includes translating complex economic and political dynamics that may be difficult to comprehend and making them relatable through story and metaphor, thus democratizing knowledge by actively breaking down barriers that exclude people from information. Emily of the Beehive Collective says in an interview with onthecommons.org, "We find that people are thirsty for accessible, non-academic tools to help them make sense of this moment we're living through and see how everything connects. Telling stories helps us do that" (Horvitz). By making complex understandings of the world's power systems comprehensible for everyone, the Beehive gives people tools to deconstruct the manipulative tools these power systems use to keep themselves intact.

For example, one function of the Beehive's *Mesoamerica Resiste!* graphic campaign, which shows the devastating impact of United States involvement in Latin America, is to highlight the deceptive messages that companies and governments tell the public in order to justify their actions. The *Mesoamerica Resiste!* graphic includes images of four messages being trumpeted, with text reading "Progress," "Inevitability," "Competitiveness" and "Capitalism"(see Figure 3). These words are prevalent in rhetoric of Neoliberalism because they assert that progress is necessary for third world countries, that competitiveness is natural and good, and that capitalism will bring democracy and prosperity to developing nations. Perhaps most devastating of all, these messages assert

the concept of inevitability, which justifies the entire cycle of foreign domination and creation of dependence by claiming that such a cycle occurs naturally and it is futile to resist globalization. Figure three shows the portion of the graphic in which these words appear, emerging from trumpets held by various figures that all represent groups with economic interest in the area. These interests include a tractor representing agri-business, a symbol of the pharmaceutical industry, a figure made up of technology including laptops and phones, and a figure with wings made of chainsaws and a face of a bulldozer, seeming to represent resource extraction projects. Each trumpeter's message furthers its ability to carry out its will in Mesoamerica, and makes it seem necessary and natural for it to do so.



Figure 3. Detail image of *Plan Mesoamerica*, part of *Mesoamerica Resiste!* graphic

The Beehive Collective's work, like some of the other art this thesis has examined, depicts political dynamics. It attempts to disrupt cultural and societal power structures by presenting a new version of dominant stories. However, the Beehive's work, perhaps more directly than other artists such as Chris Jordan, who is more of a fine

artist, could be categorized as “design of dissent.” This phrase is borrowed from a book by this title that contains a collection of rebellious political graphic art. The book also includes commentary on art as dissent. Much of this art uses existing images and then revises them to show a darker side of their meaning. The introduction is located at the end of the book, mimicking the idea of rebellion and dissent expressed by the artwork the book contains. Tony Kushner, who is a playwright, screenwriter and recipient of a National Medal of Arts, writes in the introduction, “everyday phenomenon, including language, including the language of oppression, carries within itself the seeds of its own unraveling” (Kushner 223). Images gain emotional potency when they represent a familiar cultural iconic symbol, thereby drawing on an entire base of cultural relevance and normalcy, and twist the symbol for the artist’s own purpose.

“The Design of Dissent” features a striking example of this tactic in the form of a poster of President George Bush’s face with a dark smear around the mouth, captioned “Got Oil?” (Milton and Mirko 50). The image is brilliant because it lures American viewers into complacency by linking the image to familiar “got milk?” ads, then startles us into the disturbing recognition that this president’s hunger for money and power, based in his family’s ties to the oil industry, are born from the same insatiable consumerism pushed on American citizens by big businesses such as the dairy industry. As with milk, citizens are encouraged to demand and consume endless quantities of oil, thus providing constant profit to companies.

Kushner also explains in his introduction that art of dissent is revitalizing to what he sees as a pacified audience of consumers. Forces such as advertising and greenwashing create a climate in which “...a toxic cynicism pervades our spirit, shutting

down our capacity for faith, for hope, for imagining change—and consequently shutting down our passion, our imagination” (223). Kushner’s observation is reminiscent of Joanna Macy’s theory of “Despairwork,” discussed earlier, which advocates the importance of being emotionally engaged and open, warning that when we shut off painful emotions such as fear we also numb creativity and joy. Kushner further posits, in a vein similar to Diana Boros’s concepts of art as encouraging citizenship,

These posters, these works of art, have a restorative power. Each is an argument that stamps itself indelibly on the soul of the passer-by, accepted or rejected, the argument, the claim, or demand each makes becomes a spark in the dialectical engine of consciousness, of human life. (223)

Like Boros, Kushner believes that art awakens the critical and creative minds of viewers, creating space for questioning everyday life.

Art can be a democratizing force that encourages participation and revitalizes citizenship. Citizenship means more than oppositional political voice, it also means community connection, and with that a responsibility and an emotional investment in one’s community:

The best of these posters speaks with a direct force, past all our qualifying, temporizing, even our scrupling and wisdom, to our passion, our appetite, our starved hunger for communal understanding, for collective agency, for belonging, for justice, and for change. (223)

Kushner’s hopeful rhetoric suggests that art has potential for empowerment on multiple levels. It provides an individual viewer an opportunity to simultaneously celebrate her capacity for independent, dissenting thought and also her shared humanity and her connection to forces beyond herself such as justice.

In addition to considering the democratizing effects of dissenting art, it is useful to considering what sort of subject matter provides good material for rebellious art, as

well as the ideological tensions dissenting art represents. *The Design of Dissent* also features an interview between Steven Heller, an American art director, editor and critic whose specialty is graphic design, and Milton Glaser, a graphic designer famous for creating the “I ♥ NY” symbol and the Brooklyn Brewery logo and co-founding *New York Magazine*. The interview explores causes and goals of acts of dissent. Glaser begins by arguing that dissent occurs in opposition to injustice or unfairness: “Dissenters usually have the idea that their dissent is an attempt to improve an existing condition...we like to feel like dissent is about a notion of fairness that is being violated by the existing power structure” (Heller and Glaser 224-5). The concept of fairness is very important to creating trusting, cohesive community, and therefore art of dissent can bring a community closer together by airing shared grievances against unfair conditions.

Glaser and Heller point out that other primates have also demonstrated a need for equal treatment. This commonality indicates that “fairness itself may have represented a biological device to protect the species by developing a sense of community” (225). If fairness is necessary to cohesive community, then dissent is necessary to voicing problems that divide a community. Therefore, Glaser summarizes the dynamics of dissent by saying: “there is always a source of power that is instrumental in producing dissent. The reaction of dissent is always in response to a sense of oppression that is experienced by those who dissent” (226). The Beehive Design Collective’s case follows this idea of dissent in its representation of unfair practices experienced as a result of globalization and market capitalism, including un-warranted military violence and un-just destruction of crops and livelihoods to further corporate agendas.

However, the Beehive's structure differentiates from the dissent Glaser discusses because the Bees tell other peoples' stories, articulating someone else's oppression, not their own. While this does not necessarily take away from the poignancy of the Beehive's messages or the legitimacy of the information they convey, the second-hand nature of their work does influence its composition and effect. The Beehive's approach to telling other peoples' stories may affect the way their work is viewed because the emotional impact of the events they describe has the potential to overtake the viewers' appreciation of the design and artistic skill employed by the Beehive's artists.

When Heller asks Glaser to reflect upon works of art have moved him most, Glaser admits that he was most affected by the content, not the design, of the art. Although the design impacts the emotional impact of graphic design, "What we were moved by was the poignancy of the event itself" (229). Glaser also comments on the most compelling images coming from people personally affected, who seem to be "speaking to their own family--...and have that sense that they are a participant in the situation" (230). By extension, the Beehive's art draws viewers in because of its visual detail, its metaphoric elegance and its conceptual linkages, while perhaps drawing its greatest strength from the stories of human pain, struggle and resistance these images convey. The intersection is made more complex because of the artists' perspective as listeners, observers and translators, rather than people personally affected by the issues depicted.

Heller and Glaser's interview on dissent also brings up interesting questions of the artist's role as an activist, and to what extent the artist has civic responsibility. They both assert that dissent should not be a constant state--doubt and cynicism should not be perpetual—there should also be a positive side to dissenting, which is empowerment and

proposing solutions (226). Glaser argues, “Generally, people respond to powerful imagery and words that contain an appeal to justice” (227). However, he cautions, as does Diana Boros, that dissent can also be co-opted into rebellious fashion—what Boros called “plastic art.” “Greenwashing” is an example of perpetuating the status quo under the guise of rebellious, progressive initiatives.

What, then, is an artist’s role in activism? Diana Boros has helped us consider this question in previous chapters with her concepts of art as “creative rebellion” that encourages citizenship. Glaser expresses a similar view, stating that an artist has the same responsibility as any good citizen, which he defines as “those who participate in democracy and who express their point of view, and who realize they have a role to play in the life of their time” (Heller and Glaser 230). However, Glaser also points out, “Being a [graphic] designer doesn’t suggest that you have any *more* responsibility. We all have the responsibility to be good citizens. We can either embrace that responsibility or withdraw from it. The passivity of many Americans has endangered our democracy (230).” The Beehive Design Collective is an example of a group of citizens who take their voice and their ability to protest seriously, and who care about their community on local and global levels.

The Beehive’s local community is Machias, Maine, a small town in which the Bees are a vital part of the town identity and pride. The Beehive’s headquarters consist of both a large old house where Bees live and work together, and also of the Machias Valley Grange Hall, a building that the Bees restored to be used as a community gathering center and arts space. Mandy of the Beehive describes their work at the Grange by saying,

We renovated the building over five years with all volunteer labor, and then reopened it in 2005 as a community cultural center, on its 100th birthday... Through this renovation process, and since the building has been reopened, we've gotten to know the history of the Grange in our town. Especially the older generations are filled with memories of this beautiful building back in its heyday. People went to dances there, got married there..." (Stewart)

The Beehive's work to refurbish the Grange has contributed to a sense of community interaction and community pride that is mutually beneficial for the Bees and the Machias townspeople.

Emma McCumber, a Bee who visited Bates College, added to my understanding of the Beehive's community partnership by describing their "open door policy," which means the Beehive house's door is always unlocked and people are always welcome to come in. Emma told a story of her first day living at the Beehive headquarters, when two young boys from town came onto the Bees' lawn pushing a bike with a broken chain, and she heard one boy say to the other, "let's go ask the Bees for help, they'll know what to do." Emma seemed proud and happy of this reputation. In addition, she told of a neighborhood park the Beehive takes care of. The park used to be thought of as a place to do drugs, but now there are flowers there and people bring their kids to play in the green space (McCumber).

Another important way the Beehive lives their commitment to community involvement occurs through their commitment to paying taxes, even though they technically are not required to since they are a non-profit organization. The Beehive's choice to pay taxes helps with town relations, and proves their commitment to contributing in positive ways to their local surroundings (McCumber). The Bees enact citizenship and community building on local levels through work such as refurbishing the

Grange, in addition to their all-encompassing work in the Americas through their graphics campaigns that links specific issues to global dynamics.

While the Beehive exemplifies active citizenship, it is often difficult to encourage others to move past passivity. In the interview between Glaser and Heller, they discuss the problem of getting alternative messages out into the “cultural bloodstream,” pointing out that renting a billboard for three week may cost as much as \$100,000, “so, you realize that frequently dissent is sort of nominal dissent because the ability to enter into the culture is very costly” (230). Therefore, says Glaser, “what you hope for is that these ideas will travel, as they say, virally. That people will catch on, and that the message will quickly circulate” (230). Spreading ideas virally is exactly what the Beehive is designed to achieve through their grassroots approach.

The Bees do not attempt to spread their dissenting message through conventional means such as billboards, television, or art galleries. Perhaps this is partially because acquiring the money to do so could easily undermine and contort their mission. For example, if they accepted donations from corporations to run an ad campaign, they would have a hard time promoting their anti-capitalist and anti-globalization messages. By staying donation-based and anti-copyright, the Beehive is able to avoid many of the destructive pulls of capitalism. Capitalism often promotes greed and lack of sharing, both within the group and in the group’s interaction with others. If the Beehive started selling their posters for a higher price, or only showing the posters in fine art galleries as opposed to at common spaces such as fairs, parks and schools, they would instantly limit their audience and accessibility, thus changing their relationship with the larger community. Furthermore, if the Bees were to start taking credit as individual artists for

their contribution to the graphics, the dynamics of collectivism could easily be disrupted by individual pride, greed and want for recognition and power. Questions such as whether to give some of the artists a larger share of the profit could emerge.

The Beehive's structure is important not only because of the way it produces inner and outer dynamics of cooperation and sharing, but also because the sharing approach allows the Beehive's art to, in Glaser's words, "go viral." In my experience of writing this thesis, I have often found that even if people do not know directly about the Beehive Design Collective, they have seen a Beehive poster or patch somewhere. The Beehive's work stays grounded through their emphasis on human connection as a basis for sharing stories. Of course, with modern technology the Beehive is able to spread their images and messages online, but they still rely predominantly on a personal, storytelling, person-to-person method. The Beehive's website claims,

Each year our touring swarms present narrative picture-lectures at over 300 locations in the Western Hemisphere, and we've now distributed over 160,000 posters, completely by hand (not sold in stores) since 2001! All of these events are organized by grassroots, word of mouth, efforts. We thrive thanks to the generosity of those who host us. ("Who We Are: Beehive Design Collective")

This impact is truly remarkable. It is remarkable not only because of its size, but because of the anti-capitalist way it functions. The Beehive avoids the trap of being unable to outspend the big companies with their consumerist, individualistic advertisements, by disseminating their ideas through alternative avenues. The Beehive makes work for the commons, not-for-profit, and asks for donations rather than a set fee for their presentations, and yet they are wildly successful in achieving their goals. Part of the reason they are able to do so is because profit and privatization are not their goals—sharing, spreading knowledge and communal ownership of stories and artwork are. The

Beehive does their work in the world in an alternative way that proposes a radically different system of economics and ownership.

As effective as it can be for confronting political and economic norms, the Beehive's work is not only intended for these purposes, it is also an educational tool. A main way that the Beehive gets its messages and stories out into the world is by traveling to schools, fairs, universities, and rallies and using the banners to educate people about the messages of globalization, neocolonialism, consumerism, environmental degradation, and resistance movements. Given this educational focus, it is useful to consider how the Beehive's art teaching strategies fit into the wider, emerging field of Art and Visual Culture Education.

The new field of Visual Culture Education is shifting art education towards integrating political and ethical concerns. In his article "Visual Culture Isn't Just Visual: Multiliteracy, Multimodality and Meaning," Paul Duncum argues for the importance of emphasizing visual culture in art education. He claims the re-conceptualizing of art as visual culture reflects 'the visual' being seen as a source of knowledge in many different disciplines. This appreciation of the importance of the visual derives from a recognition that "people today derive meaning from all kinds of imagery as part of their everyday experience" (Duncum 254). Given this recognition, visual education tends to "regard context as extending to the political and economic as well as the character of everyday life. Images are understood as constitutive of ongoing social practices, both a mirror and a contributor to social activity" (Duncum 254). Visual culture education takes the position that images are not passive, or created in a vacuum irrelevant to social influences, but are in fact reflective of and influential upon society.

Images convey meaning that permeates human consciousness on many levels, and its influence should not be overlooked. If images are understood to have psychological power, they can be analyzed as such, empowering students to question the images they see and think critically about the messages they may be unconsciously accepting. Duncum's article questions why images have such immense power in modern times, and finds one answer from Jenks who suggests that images have begun to occupy a vacuum left by religious and family institutions whose power has declined. He states that visual culture has become the source from which people learn how to live. Jenks explains, "As traditional institutions like the church, family, unions, and class affiliations wane in importance, people increasingly look to the cultural sites of global capital for their attitudes, values and beliefs" (Jenks in Duncum 256). In her article "Metaphor Crafters" Susanne Antonetta makes a similar point, claiming that "Walter Benjamin and other theorists of the present day argue we've turned from a word-based culture back to a visual one like that of the Middle Ages, when the illiterate learned their Bible stories from fresco cycles" (Antonetta). She warns of dangerous implication of a visually-based culture, especially those arising from the ease of manipulation. Media has a dominant role in such manipulation:

As imagery from all media feeds our imaginations, it grows more and more controlled by those who have a vested interest in how it's perceived—government, mainstream news and entertainment, the corporations that want us to buy their products and ignore their transgressions. (Antonetta)

Images affect people whether or not they are conscious of the affects. Therefore, learning to work with images and to understand their layers of meaning is an important tool to maintain one's critical thought and independence. This tool has strong implications for

teaching youth to be active and critical citizens, and for beginning to break down the cycles of consumerism and passivity that plague current American society.

Other scholars in the field of art education support the connection between art and citizenship, including Paul Bolin and Doug Blandy in their article “Beyond Visual Culture: Seven Statements of Support for Material Culture Studies in Art Education” (2003). These scholars cite de Tocqueville, whose theories Diana Boros also references. de Tocqueville’s argues that democratic culture will transition away from the strict confines of institutions such as religion and family, towards more open ended, self-determined perceptions of reality: “He believed that in contrast to non-democratic societies, culture in a democracy would be less firmly defined and more responsive to wide variances in people’s values, attitudes, and beliefs” (de Toqueville in Bolin and Blandy 246). Therefore, active citizenship requires the ability to think critically about one’s own beliefs.

Visual culture education can aid this process because it promotes conscious evaluation and contemplation, rather than unquestioning acceptance. Bolin and Blandy claim that art education fills a special role: “Art educators can uniquely contribute to this preparation of citizens by promoting the investigation and appreciation of the broadest possible range of objects, artifacts, spaces, expressions, and experiences” (Bolin and Blandy 246). If visual culture teaching has the ability to encourage critical interaction with the visual, then teaching with the Beehive’s graphics has a dual ability to educate: both by enhancing critical analysis of images generally, and by encouraging criticism of the glossy, appealing reputations of companies and consumerism that the Beehive’s posters so pointedly criticize and implicate in cycles of destruction and violence.

In this way, the Beehive’s process of education falls into the category of what scholar David Darts calls “visual culture jamming:” making viewers reconsider the familiar messages we visually consume through a process of re-ordering the familiar. This process has the potential to shift a passive consumer mentality to a more active citizenship mentality. Darts quotes visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff’s argument that “the human experience is now more visual and visualized than ever before, and visual culture is not just a part of our everyday lives, it *is* our everyday lives” (Darts 315). Therefore, the ideology of visual culture has a profound impact on the way we live our lives, but it is rarely analyzed or discussed. Darts quotes Duncum in explaining the danger of ideology:

Ideology works not because it calls particular attention to itself, but because it grounds itself in taken-for-granted, common-sense assumptions. Ideology works through ordinary cultural artifacts, and it can be hard to resist because it so often appears to belong to the realm of the natural...While culture is always a site of struggle to define how life is to be lived and experienced, the struggle is often rendered invisible. (Darts 315)

The Beehive’s graphics are a powerful tool to make visible the struggle of ideologies that encourage different ways of life.

Mesoamerica Resiste! provides a stunning example of a visual piece that questions ideology on multiple levels. In her article “Targeting ‘Plan Colombia’”, Carolyn Erler compares the Beehive Design Collective’s graphic *Plan Colombia* to images and rhetoric used by the Drug Enforcement Administration Museum. Her analysis finds that one important function of the Beehive’s graphic is to present a counter-narrative to the dominant narrative. She cites authors Kellner and Share who argue the media is “constructed for political purposes,” and therefore believe a critical teaching

approach to visual media “brings an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of most media education” (Erler 85). Therefore, these theorists suggest “an active, dialectical process of meaning-making involving the audience in “a cultural struggle between dominant readings, oppositional readings or negotiated meanings” (Kellner and Share in Erler 85). This process challenges conventional and normative understandings of everyday images by encouraging viewers to critically engage in understanding the images on their own terms.

The Beehive’s graphic *Mesoamerica Resiste!* offers just such an opportunity for students to allow students and citizens a chance to engage in a struggle to make meaning from images. This ten foot by thirty foot graphic depicts two views of globalization in Latin America: one top-down view from international organizations and corporations that see the region as a map of territory to be conquered in order to gain access to its resources, and one bottom-up view from the perspective of people living in the region between Mexico and Colombia. The Beehive’s website tells that the graphic project began when “In 2004 an initial group of Bees traveled from Mexico to Panama over 5 months to meet with people on the frontlines of resistance to a regional development plan then known as Plan Puebla Panama (PPP)” (“Mesoamerica Resiste”). The Bees collected stories of resistance along with stories of human rights violations and environmental devastation, weaving the stories and images together into the magnificently intricate poster that is *MesoAmerica Resiste!* (see Figure 3 and 3a).

The graphic’s physical design reflects the stories it tells. In its paper form, the poster folds so that the top-down view of Mesoamerica, which represents the view of large corporations, governments and organizations such as the World Bank who are not

directly connected to the region, opens up to show an image three times as large of stories of local peoples' resistance. This construction manifests the idea that the colonial worldview is dominant but it is narrow, and underneath there are a multiplicity of worldviews, perspectives, and stories that are not often heard. A useful illustration on the Beehive's website shows how the poster works (see Figure 4).



Figure 3. Outside, “top-down” view of *Mesoamerica Resiste!* graphic



Figure 3a. Inside, “bottom-up” view of *Mesoamerica Resiste!* graphic

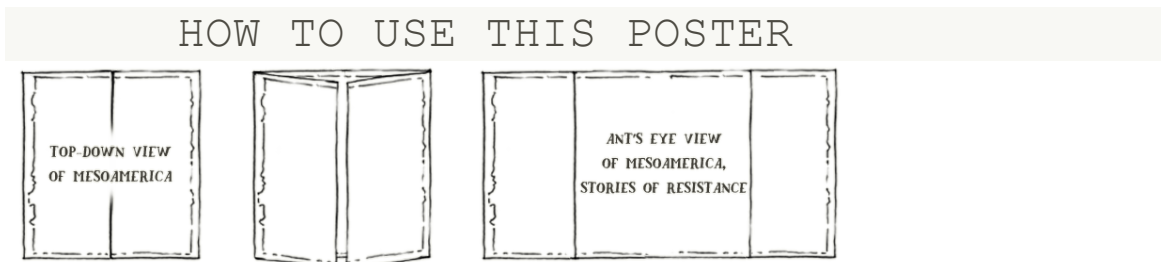


Figure 4. Illustration of layout of *Mesoamerica Resiste!*

Since it is impossible to explicate each detail of this incredibly intricate graphic, let us examine a section of the outside of the poster and a section of the inside. The outside view features four characters at the corners of the map, alluding to old colonial maps that featured portraits of sponsors and kings in the corners. This map has four characters: the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, and the InterAmerican Development Bank. These international organizations fund the majority of development projects in Latin America, which the Beehive describes as “mega-infrastructure projects that are literally paving the way for free trade agreements

that devastate local economies and communities” including “industrial scale mega-projects, like super-highways, dams, and power grids” (“Mesoamerica Resiste”).

In the upper right corner of the map sits a character representing the World Trade Organization (see Figure 5). He is a bodiless form, wearing judge’s robes and a wig, whose two hands perform two functions: one is playing “whack-a-mole” and one holds scales and a mobile. The hand playing “whack-a-mole” represents the World Trade Organization’s efforts to shut down social movements that oppose its political and economic objectives, including the Zapatista movement, the EcoFeminism movement led by Vandana Shiva, and labor unions. However, the governments’ attempts are unsuccessful, because whenever a social movement is repressed, it springs up again in a new form, hence the metaphor of whack-a-mole. This metaphor is hopeful and encouraging because it draws upon ideals that the peoples’ voice cannot be silenced, their rights cannot be denied, their spirit will continue to fight in new creative ways.

In the other hand, the World Trade Organization holds scales, representing the balance of whose interests the organization cares about. On one side of the mobile are headdresses of many indigenous groups, and on the other side is a single top hat representing western, industrial interests. The scales are extremely tipped in favor of the hat. This image is only a microcosm of the level of detail the Beehive’s graphics contain, and the degree of symbolism and story involved.



Figure 5. Detail image of WTO from *MesoAmerica Resiste!*

The whack-a-mole depicted in this image provides an example of the Beehive’s attempt to include humor in their graphics. Emma McCumber, the member of the Beehive who presented at Bates, mentioned that she is always attempting to find ways to make her presentation funnier because humor provides a hook to make people feel entertained as well as educated (McCumber). She also cited examples of the Beehive including inside jokes in their graphics that only some viewers may understand. One instance of such an inside joke is a section of the drawing showing ants sharing a meal with spiders and other “unpleasant” creatures that the Beehive had used as evil characters in some of its earlier graphics, but in retrospect decided they should not vilify. In *Mesoamerica Resiste!* the Bees made up for their previous affront to these animals by inviting them over for tacos (McCumber).

In contrast to the “top-down” view of development that the outside of the graphic portrays, the inside features a “bottom-up” view that celebrates resistance from the perspective of a person living in the region, and fulfills the Beehive’s goal to “draw the good news three times as large” (Stewart). The inside view takes the perspective of an ant living on a Cieba tree, and shows a myriad forms of courage and resistance. One section of the graphic depicts the joint issues of land grabs and infrastructure projects (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Detail image of “The Land Grab” and “Airport” from *MesoAmerica Resiste*

The images in this section are described in the Beehive’s informational narrative as “The Land Grab” and “Airport.” The copy machine depicted represents the “one-size-fits-all development plans” that are implemented in Mesoamerica without consideration of specific conditions and needs, or affects on local populations. Such plans include resource extraction and infrastructure development. The plane attempting to land depicts

a specific instance of resistance to such land grab plans. In the town of San Salvador Atenco, corn farmers successfully protested to prevent their land from being taken over to make room for the airport. As the Beehive narrative explains, “People in the town of San Salvador Atenco organized and successfully fought to keep their land from being expropriated for the airport.” This example shows the Beehive’s storytelling approach.

Not only do the Bees show an abstract, metaphoric image that depicts the overarching forces at work—in this case, the photocopy machine churning out identical development plans—but they also show a local story of resistance to such large forces, indicating how the forces affect people on the ground. Furthermore, the image of protest is not just used to enhance the art, it is used as a tool to aid the protestors themselves. The narrative booklet mentions, “This image of campesinos in Atenco, wielding machetes to defend their land, quickly became emblematic of popular protests against the PPP [Plan Puebla Panama].” The Beehive’s images are tied to reality on both ends of production: they are directly inspired by peoples’ lived experiences, and they go back to those same people to be used to aid in their continuing struggle.

The Beehive Design Collective’s art fits into the realm of visual culture education because of these connections to reality, and because of its method of portraying familiar images in unfamiliar ways to challenge our normative conceptions. Showing an airplane cowed by a corn figure wielding machetes and a copy machine as an instrument of oppression re-order the familiar, thus disrupting our ideas of what “development” means. Planes are not just vehicles for us to travel wherever we desire, and technology and development plans are not always positive for communities if the community’s needs are not taken into account. The images on the outside, “top-down” part of the graphic

disrupts familiar images in an even more sharply critical manner. The World Trade Organization image we examined earlier is one example of the way the Beehive shows the darker side of seemingly beneficial and benevolent organizations. In addition, the front of the graphic shows many familiar corporations such as Starbucks, Chiquita Banana company, Burger King and Union Carbide Chemicals controlling these cycles of destruction, once again drawing the viewer in by encouraging recognition and then changing the perception of these known symbols that usually have positive associations.

After seeing a Beehive poster, will it be as easy to buy products from these corporations? Will the viewer still see the corporations as independent entities, separate from global forces of oppression? Will the viewer consider ways that she herself may be both implicated in and negatively affected by these forces, and how she could begin to resist? It is impossible to say how deeply images embed themselves in peoples' consciousness and therefore conscience, but the Beehive's images definitely contain the potential to incite new awareness and new activism in those willing to question and to act. Going back to Tony Kushner's quotation that began this thesis, "Art can't change anything except people—but art changes people, and people can make everything change" (Kushner 220). The Beehive's work is a compelling example of this dynamic.

Conclusion

Art is a way to re-create and therefore reimagine reality. Marc Bamuthi Joseph, Chris Jordan and the Beehive Design Collective's work is inspirational in its ability to re-imagine the world and in doing so, encourage us as viewers to re-imagine it with them. In a culture that is, as some authors we examined have suggested, turning from a literal back to a visual one, the power of images cannot be underestimated. In taking ownership of our visual experience by means of questioning and interpreting images, we can become more active and conscious citizens and activists. An essential way that all of these artists encourage us to do make this shift occur when the artists disrupting familiar images to open up, as Terry Tempest Williams calls it, "space for chaos to enter." In this chaos, this lack of certainty, this vulnerability, new ideas and understanding are born.

While it can be terrifying as a viewer to lean in to vulnerability, it is also a fertile ground for empowerment. Accepting that maybe we do not know everything, maybe the stories we think are true have other sides to them, maybe our own actions are tied to larger forces in ways we are blind to, makes us more open, more questioning, more able to see our world and our place in it. As Joanna Macy explains in earlier chapters, fear is paralyzing when avoided, but the process of moving through grief and sharing that grief with others leads to connection and motivation to create positive change.

How successful are the various artists we have examined in achieving their goals of activism? Firstly, it is important to note that their goals differ. While Bamuthi, for instance "EXPLICITLY seeks to transform," the Beehive is less explicit about its mission, seeking to educate more than to change peoples' minds. Jordan aims to transform by encouraging the viewer to feel grief, though he does not necessarily see this

process of grief through to its end. He also does not specify what the end should be: does he promote more conscientious consumer purchasing choices only? Does he encourage citizen activism? His intent is less clear.

Whatever the artists' intent, however, the research presented here leads me to believe that when art is paired with direct implementation of the ideals it portrays, its impact becomes magnified immensely by 'walking its talk.' Bamuthi's series of one-day "Life is Living" festivals are a prime example of this engagement. By fostering community development and re-imagining "green" in specific communities, Bamuthi's play comes to life and expands off the stage and out into the world in a meaningful way. Similarly, the Beehive Design Collective's educational tours and involvement in their local community manifest their ideals. The ideals make a difference in the world through the Beehive's images but also through the Bees themselves as dynamic, spunky young people who speak the messages their artwork conveys, drawing in people of all ages to listen. The Bees' art is also used directly by protest groups in Latin America and North America.

Emma McCumber says her favorite memory of being a member of the Beehive as traveling to Mesoamerica with several other Beehive members to present the completed *Mesoamerica Resiste!* Graphic to the communities whose stories it depicts. She describes the moment of unveiling the completed poster to a group of Zapatista activists, in a room where previous Beehive graphics hung on the walls. Emma says the community members were amazed to see that after nine years of work, the Bees had actually returned with the most epic graphic yet. Then the night turned into a raging party, in which Emma recalls dancing next to people of all ages, including old ladies in their Zapatista ski masks, until

the early hours in the morning when she and other Bees finally called it quits and headed to bed, hearing sounds of the community continuing to party until dawn. The feeling of having honored stories from the community, and brought them to a wider audience, was immeasurably satisfying (McCumber). Though Emma does not participate in drawing the posters, she presents the story of *Mesoamerica Resiste!* all across the country. She is intimately connected to the art and the activism of the Beehive, though she herself is not an artist in the conventional sense. Her example allows us to question what being an artist and being an activist mean. Emma's role in the Beehive shows that art can be about more than aesthetics and it can be about building community and educating and empowerment.

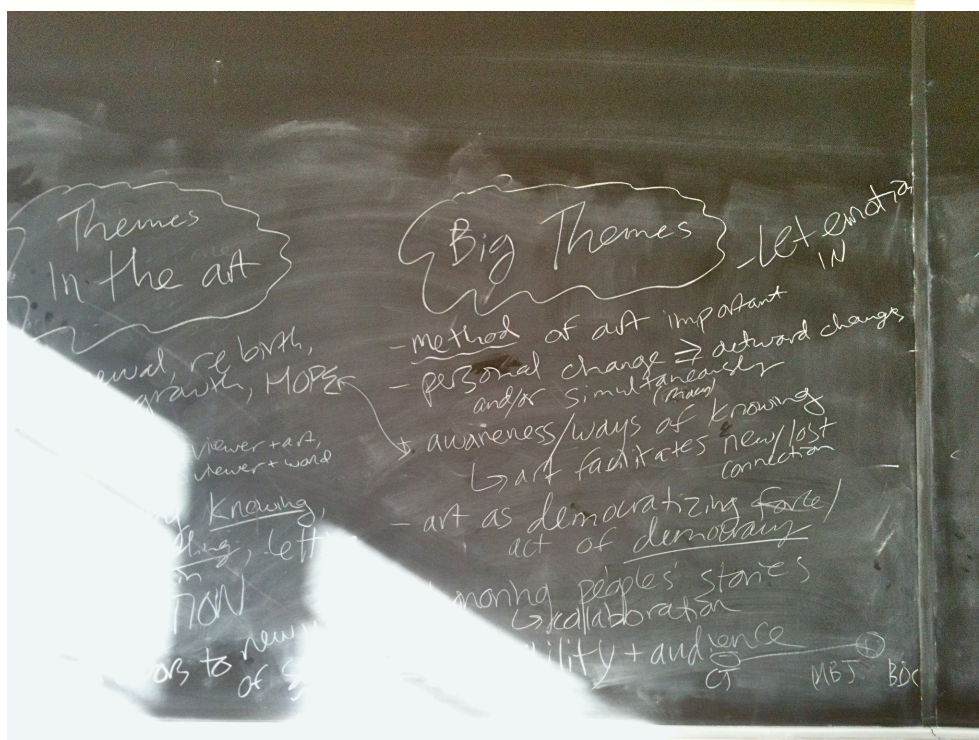
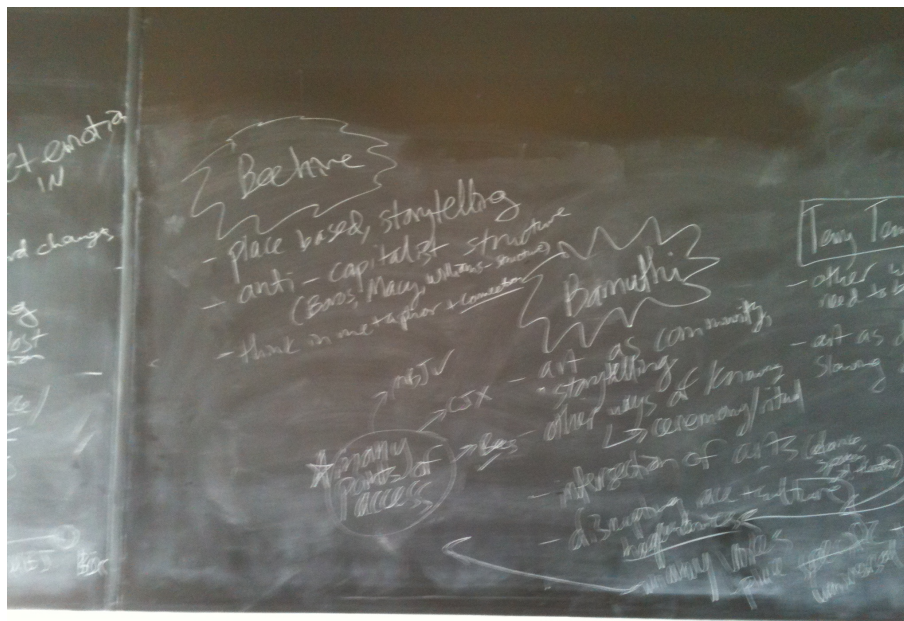
Besides the recognition that art can take on all of these roles, what advice can this thesis offer to art activists? What makes visionary art most effective to advocate for environmental change? Inspired by the Beehive Design Collective's mind maps, I made my own map of the most successful strategies I discovered through this research (see Figure 7). Elements of art activism that seem particularly effective based on my research include appealing to an audience's emotions in addition to their rationality, making art as accessible as possible, and enacting the principles of the art you create. Various artists we have examined are more successful in some of these areas than others. For instance, though all of the artists make both rational arguments and elicit emotional responses, some such as Jordan are particularly impactful in citing statistics that his work illustrates, whereas Bamuthi's work could be said to work on more emotional levels by asking questions like "what would grow here?" and speaking about a grieving mother's despair about the death of her son as opposed to citing statistics about black crime. However,

Jordan is less effective than Bamuthi in exemplifying his work through public action. In terms of accessibility, there is a balance to be found between reaching a large audience by such means as galleries and mainstream media, and maintaining an ability for a variety of people from different races, interest groups, geographic locations and socioeconomic statuses to be able to benefit from your work. Bamuthi seems to find a fantastic balance, while Jordan aims more for a gallery audience and the Beehive for more of a word-of-mouth, locally known audience.

Aspects of successful art activism in which all three artists excel include using art to dissent against what is unjust, combining perspectives that are personal and specific with over-arching context, and communicating messages on many levels, including visual, intellectual, spiritual and physical. Dissent and disruption are foundational to what Boros has termed “visionary art,” because they shock viewers out of complacency and express rebellion visually. All of the artists we have examined specialize in dissent and disruption in their own forms. The combination of personal and big-picture narratives is also a strength shared by all three artists. For the Beehive this means telling individual story snapshots of resistance while showing global trends and power dynamics. For Bamuthi this means speaking to his own son through his poetry while also reflecting on overarching patterns of black exclusion from the Green movement. For Jordan this means both showing the enormity of consumption in *Running the Numbers* and the intimacy and personal devastation it causes in *Midway*. Lastly, Jordan, Bamuthi and the Beehive all exemplify synthesizing multiple forms of communication such as auditory, visual, intellectual, spiritual, and physical to create work that involves the *whole* person. In its ability to make us *feel*, not just *think*, art possesses a special superpower. Compelling

images slip past our protective walls of rationality and hit us in the gut of emotion. When emotion as well as rationality governs our understanding of the world, we are able to perceive freshly, to think outside the box, and to recognize the shared nature of our emotions that bonds us to our communities. Together, artists and communities are capable of creating the awareness that catalyzes environmental change.

Figure 7. my mind-maps of themes shared between the three artists



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