

ANNA HUFF MERCOVICH: TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

As a teacher of interdisciplinary arts my goals are to help students: locate their own voice within multiple perspectives as a starting point to creating work; explore physical presence in relation to objects and technology; and consider art making as an important transformative mode of community engagement, ritual, and cultural production. My teaching integrates a combination of process based assignments, lectures, small group activities, reading, writing, and critical thinking exercises.

My strategies are informed by my own practice working within diverse art making landscapes as well as years of working as an educator and learning from multi-disciplinary models. I focus on addressing issues from multiple disciplines and ask students to consider these in relationship to their own communities, citizenship and diversity. I nudge students to not just see the world and the art world as it is, but to imagine what it could possibly be with them as the creators and agitators of meaning.

I begin classes by setting a supportive environment for the expression of ideas. I often break students into smaller groups to create and think. This both sets a tone for collaborative process and cultivates a permissible space for students to try out ideas which may not function as well in larger group. I sometimes vary seating configurations and allow the students to come up with ways to group themselves. I find a malleable physical environment translates into fresh perspectives to approaching work. Together and individually my students develop ideas, which feed into a shared iterative body of culture and identity within the classroom.

When my students physically engage in learning, I notice their experience becomes instantly more activated and pronounced. I often begin my classes with a short student-led physical exercise. This might be a Fluxus piece, or a simple warm up intended to activate the class focus for the day. Additionally, I challenge students to consider how their work is affected by the tools they choose. In one assignment, I give multiple groups the same question or concept and then provide each group with different sets of tools, objects and parameters. What is this piece as a pair of socks, as a sound recording, or as a time based digital work? I also ask the question “What would the work be if all the tools were taken away?”

My teaching reflects a commitment to building community in physical space as well as virtual space. My digital classes ask students to each create websites as a site for showing work, as well as a location for doing peer review, blog posts and online web work dealing with interactivity. They examine the notions of “public” and “private” articulation, and though are given a choice to keep their url’s confidential, they almost always choose to use the site for public and transparent expression.

I expect my students to be prepared to read, attend screenings, and put in a significant amount of time outside of class making work. One group discussion technique I use is to simultaneously assign different authors around a similar topic. Students

discuss the topic in small groups from the multiple perspectives of the authors and then come up with important shared questions. Once these questions and this mode of inquiry are established, they are well equipped to engage in writing, media production, or performance assignments within a diverse framework. They can articulate what they care about within multiple perspectives.

Finally, it is important to me that students participate in making and viewing work outside of the studio and engage in site-specific and fieldwork assignments. This mirrors my belief in my own art practice; that art making should also be considered within communities, public spaces and locations outside of formal and sometimes inaccessible settings. My students have created performances and other work for very specific locations including but not limited to public stairwells, Starbucks parking lots, forests and subways. Rather than responding just to sets of ideas or historical precedence, these assignments challenge them to bring their practice into their current environment and to become more accountable to their immediate surroundings. It also gets them into the mindset that space and accessibility are possible.

My teaching philosophy intends to reflect an ideological balance between specialization learning and critical thinking. Students should come out of my classes with practical tools for creating art within a changing society and economic “system;” and to be able to consider critically the relationships of power, language and interdependence within that society. I intend for them to leave my classes with an understanding and recognition of their own voice as an important signifier in culture. This necessitates an understanding of when their voice is coming from a more institutionalized or culturally conditioned/shared place. If they are focusing on formal aspects of performance and media making, they must also consider the rituals and context that sustain and inform these practices.