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*Gina Lamb*

## **Media Arts and Educational Movements in the U.S.**

In the United States, media literacy, school reform movements, and community media arts programs sprung from different motivations and inspired the creation of different types of programs for working with youth. Many cross over pedagogical concerns existed and collaborations spawned new ideas about media education in the late eighties and early 90's. The media literacy movement's interest lay in youth understanding and analyzing mainstream media feeds. Artist and community media makers were interested in capitalist media resistance and giving voice to underrepresented and disenfranchised youth in American society. School reform movements were interested in looking at students differently, as active and knowledgeable participants in their own education (inquiry based, experiential, democratic, student centered, and cooperative learning based). All were interested in media education as a discipline not just to train future media workers – but also to foster the type of critical autonomy that it takes to be an informed citizen in a democratic society.

### **Setting the Stage for Systemic Change**

The early eighties saw a time of increased conservatism in education. Emphasis was placed on the basic fundamentals of reading, writing and math. Arts education in public schools were seen as "frivolous, expensive and unnecessary" and suffered cuts and

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elimination at the hands of school administrators. Yet, at this same moment, decreases in the cost of equipment and the portability of the camcorder created liberation within the media arts field. Communities disenfranchised from both mainstream media and established “high art” venues, such as grassroots community activists, women, artists of color, and queer artists gained production access by setting up their own media centers. These burgeoning cultural/arts exploits were loaded with critical analysis of media images. Video art since its inception has had concerns with deconstructing its own medium. As a visual genre it has the unique position of existing as a commercial medium first with a domestic delivery system that had been in place for years before artists got a hold of the first portable cameras in the sixties. As a result, video art already had a rich history with media deconstruction built into its output. This self-reflexive resistance to the mainstream media machine fostered a generation of media activists who had desires to effect change within media constructions of race, class, gender and identity. Media arts programs driven by artists started cropping up throughout the country in community arts centers, in women's groups, in community TV cable access centers and even at unlikely venues such as churches. At the same time, media studies programs began melding with culture and gender studies. Many media artists and media activists, like myself, began working with youth through schools and community centers. We produced collaborative video documentaries and created issue-based stories that brought light to youth concerns. The work the youth produced proved to be honest and relevant to their peers and to their community.

## **Organizing Across the Country**

In 1987 diverse artists from around the U.S. who were teaching media arts with youth came together at the National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture and formed the National Youth Media Alliance (NYMA). Two years later, NAMAC invited educational reformers and media literacy advocates to the table to discuss media education with the artist members of NYMA. With these new member groups the NYMA merged into a new coalition, the National Alliance of Media Educators (NAME). This group shared pedagogical methods, media curriculum, technological concerns, networking and production access issues. Through this coalition community media artists first learned about the more formalized

Media Literacy Education movement. In the US, this movement was modeling itself directly from the previously developed curriculums in Australia and Canada with a goal of instituting Media Literacy Education throughout the US in K-12 schools.

Media artists who were primarily teaching production were, of course, very interested in incorporating media literacy in their practice. The inclusion of these curriculum ideas and resources provided media artists with invaluable tools for their programs that could be easily integrated into school media education programs.

Many of the same artists also felt that the definition of Media Literacy as “the ability to analyze and produce media in a variety of forms” did not go far enough to describe the type of media education that was developing under the influence of the multi-cultural arts and activist movements. The emphasis on analyzing solely mainstream media was problematic in that by only talking about what’s on TV even if you discuss it in terms of race, class, gender, you are still leaving out the voice of those who do not have a place in mainstream media: the majority of poor, queer, brown, black and young Americans. The problem being that most educators and those in the media literacy education movements were, either unaware of, or did not know how to access media works produced by truly diverse and independent artists. Most were not aware of the rich history of media arts deconstructing mainstream media and of self-reflexive critical works that were developing new language and diverse new voices within this medium.

So after hashing out some of these differences in pedagogical approaches the National Alliance of Media Educators, which included proponents from the media arts, education reformers and media literacy advocates, worked together to develop a broader definition of what media education could be. The resulting definition includes three equal elements: mainstream media analysis, presentation and analysis of independent/alternative media forms, and creative youth media production.

## On the Home Front

I now want to switch gears from the national media education situation in America so that I can share with you specific models of media arts education with which I have been fortunate enough to be involved.

By 1991 56% of California schools reported some form of media production – with little or no training for teachers. Artists were needed to bridge this gap in order to get video out of the realm of documenting football games and into pro-active media programs that focus on student lead projects, social issue documentaries and activism. By the late 1980s educational reform, especially in the inner cities, was back “in style” because education performance statistics were sliding downwards. In the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) the dropout rate was 30% by the time students reached high school. Poverty and multiculturalism were huge issues. Many schools reported over fifty percent of their students as low income and over 30% of students were not proficient in the English language. High schools in Los Angeles could boast of being the largest in the country with 3000-5000 students.

In 1988 Los Angeles Educational Partnership introduced a new educational reform program called Humanitas which would create smaller humanities based academies within LA’s oversized high schools. Teachers would team teach so that each group of 300 Humanitas students would have the same teachers for at least three of their classes. English, history, and social studies were taught in an interdisciplinary style (so that they directly related in timeline and subject) under an educational theme. The overarching goal of the program was making connections, connections with educational disciplines, between students and teachers, and with community and family.

Six media artists were to work with a Humanitas teams of teachers to develop projects that would further connect the curriculum disciplines while implementing student lead media project based learning. I embraced this opportunity, because as an artist and educator I also saw media deconstruction and the production of social issue documentaries as opportunities to connect the students' education directly to their communities.

For example, when the 11th grade students were studying U.S. history and literature of the twentieth century under the theme of diversity we noticed that African American and Latino students were having trouble relating to the history textbooks. So as a group we decided to create a video documentary that literally deconstructed the dry readings from the history textbook and juxtaposed them with oral history interviews of a very diverse group of elders from the Los Angeles community. From Native Americans who were not able to practice freedom of religion, and Japanese who were forced into internment camps during WWII to communist party members and right wing republicans. "Textbook Mystery Oral History" produced by fifty 11th grade students examined how they were learning and challenged the very books they were reading by directly interviewing older Americans. History came alive for these youth and there was a sense ownership to the information when students discovered important stories of minorities left out of the history text. As a result these youth initiated a letter writing campaign to change the state approved history books.

Media education should help students to understand the political, economic and social structures shaping the institutions of popular media, as well as its messages. And it should help students, through an examination of their own social context, to understand their own power and position in creating culture.

This particular high school Humanitas Program, was located in South Central Los Angeles, synonymous in the mainstream media with the illegal drug trade and gang violence. Interestingly enough, I found that South Central churches were teaching media literacy before it was popular in mainstream education as a means community of survival. Questions such as, How can one reconcile ones existence in a black male body that is demonized in movies and nightly on the news, formed the basis for many pedagogical moments. In reaction to the news media's takeover of the neighborhood, church-going families learn about stereotyping, target audiences, and the mass marketing of cigarettes and alcohol to low-income communities. These commercials literally attack the neighborhoods – so church members went on the defensive and conducted massive "white outs" – painting away offensive billboard advertising near local schools. These public actions are lessons for our youth on target marketing and creative expressions of

community anger and grief. As an artist, this was also an incredible “art as life” learning experience for me as well.

It was refreshing to explore media literacy with students that really “got it.” Yet even though they did not have ownership of the hegemonic values of popular entertainment, these students still desired to participate in the fantasy of entertainment. So deconstructing mainstream media leaves our students hating that we are ruining their escapist media fantasies, while simultaneously making them painfully aware of their “missing image”. In under-represented communities this can cause societal resentment and frustration. There is a strong need to provide new role models of alternative voices.

## Finding Alternatives

So how do we reach these disenfranchised students to get them re-engaged in education? And how can we get them to recognize their potential for using communication to change culture? These questions are the strength of the argument for including independent/art media as an equal component of media education as a means to provide positive alternatives to mainstream media. Alternatives that build a community of diverse voices, of role models that these youth can identify with. Los Angeles has a wealth of independent artists and documentarians who are not only providing an alternative viewpoint to white corporate dominated media but are pushing the boundaries of what media can be by experimenting with new visual languages and making work that has a powerful impact in the lives of these youth. These voices come from the African American, Asian, Latino/a, Native American, and Queer communities. Marlon Riggs, a self-identified “Black Gay Butch Queen” and one of the most powerful media poet/artists of all time makes the argument clear in the following quote:

*The mythology of America, the myth of what it means to be an American, is facing at last, its own exorable fate. For what this myth required, and what the mass media which supported this myth sustained, for too long, for too many of us, was the soul crushing negation of our lives and our struggles, the silence of our most intimate, deepest life sustaining truths. The mythology of America always demanded of its devotees and its victims more than mere assimilation: it forced us to view the best within ourselves as the worst. The most precious within us, that which shaped and nurtured our distinctive character, our visions of the world, our identities we jettisoned. For the sake of cultural and political conversion-or better still conformity - to the status quo, we've paid the price, and are paying still, with currencies of social dislocation, violence, alienation, internalized shame, communal silence, and chronic social decay. The price of*

*America's mythology is measured in our spiritual devastation-and too often, too literally in blood. And the reason America's mythic walls are finally crumbling is simply this: we are no longer willing to bleed, and hence to pay. (from "A Snap! Deliberates: "Reading" the Media" by Marlon T. Riggs, Nov/Dec 91 Video, The Center for New Television)*

So by the early nineties a strong plethora of diverse independent video art work existed in direct defiance to the mainstream myth and it is extremely intoxicating in its opposition, particularly for the rebellious culture of youth. Work that says I can speak and speak both eloquently or angrily outside of the norms of what I have known as constructed media "truths". I can be effective! And without the corporate backing it takes to be "Hollywood".

To bring this excitement into the Humanitas Program I implemented a visiting artist screening series, called Expanded Visions, where once a month local artists would screen their videos and talk to students (usually to an audience of 500). Many of these events brought open dialogues on issues of race, politics and sexual identity to this youth audience for the first time so the following discussions were lively to say the least. Both artists and youth loved the exchange with questions running all over the map and sometimes very serious issues getting spoken about as diverse artist works moved youth to speak up like never before.

## **Make it Yourself**

An equally important reason to include creative arts production as part of the media education curriculum is that many of our students were internalizing great amounts of pain that would be manifested in poor school performance. Because of the success of other projects I was given leeway to develop more experimental projects. I decided it was important for students to connect their education with themselves internally. The progressive teachers in this program agreed so we conducted a series of poetry workshops with video production, which provided a safe and creative outlet for some of these deeply personal but communally painful stories (discrimination, poverty, abuse, violence, depression, immigrant dislocation). Stories that didn't come up in typical classroom learning, but needed to be told. The completed works proved to be incredibly cathartic and offered the students the knowledge that their personal issues and concerns

were respected in the school environment and that once recognized could be shared as a communal strengthening force.

## **Distribution**

Since the major obstacle for educators to offer media arts models in the classroom is having access to video artworks made by diverse independent artists, I began working with our local media arts festival, LA Freewaves, to raise funds to regularly distribute artists' videos to LA City schools to set up permanent alternative media libraries. To ensure it would work, we hired teachers to select tapes from each festival that would be most useful and appropriate for the classroom. We also wrote curricular materials to accompany each tape. This proved to be a highly effective way to build new audiences for independent media while creating community amongst teachers, youth and media artists.

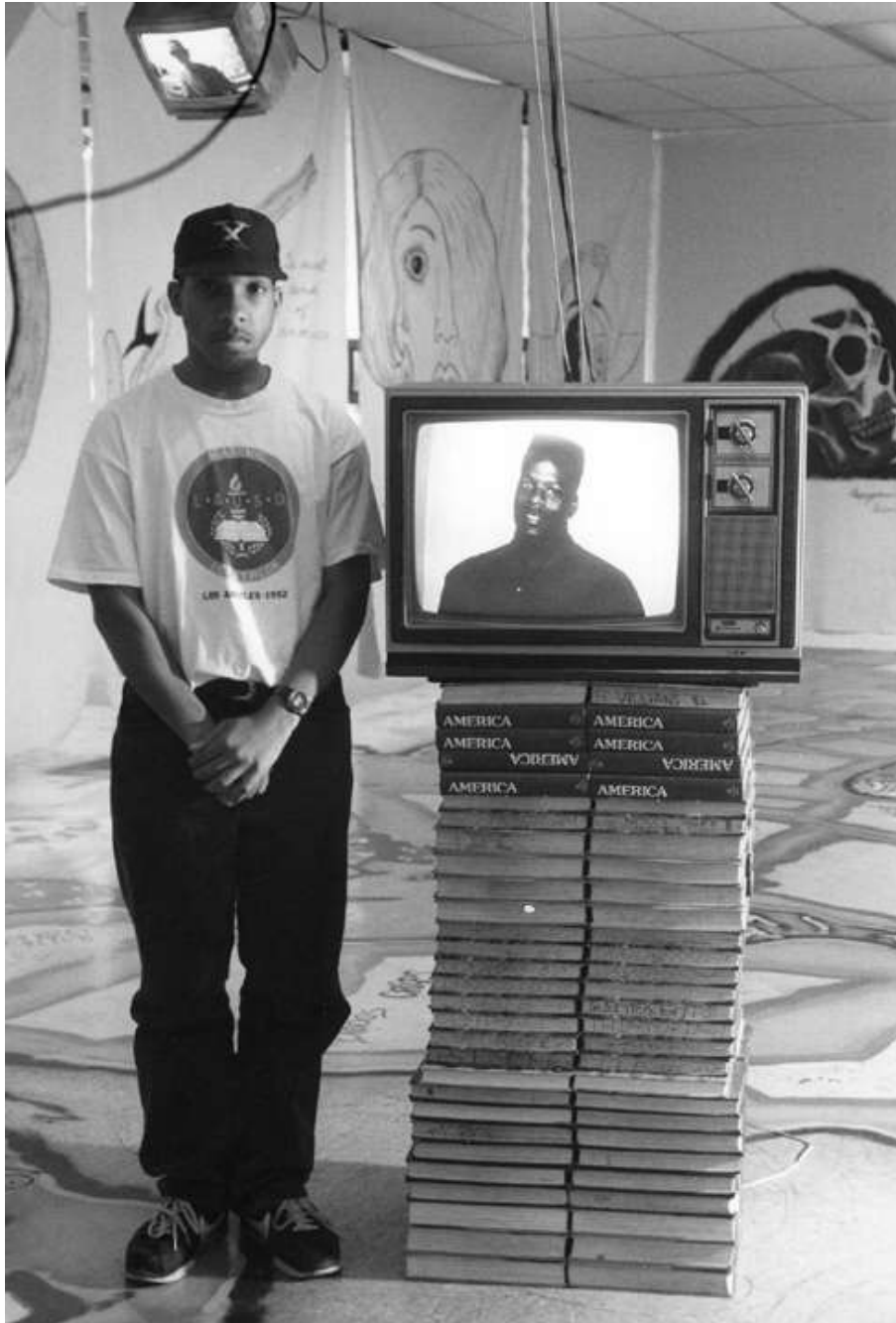
We were not the only ones to come up with innovative methods to distribute media art to schools. In 1996 the State of Washington's Art Commission (which usually funds large scale permanent public sculptures) decided to use their annual "Art In Public Places" budget to put together a collection of video art and to distribute it to every public school in the state. They commissioned panels of artists, educators and curators, to select the collection and developed curricular materials. It was similar to what LA Freewaves was doing for each festival, but on a one time, grander scale. The work exists, finding it, however takes effort.

## **In Conclusion**

I worked within the Humanitas Program for eight years and felt that it was a strong working model of how media arts can be successfully incorporated across multidisciplinary curriculum with innovative teaching ideas and project based learning that has real world connections. Obviously this would not have been possible without progressive teacher and artist connections. The program still exists in various forms designed by teachers and artists in several Los Angeles Schools, but without the funding and supports it garnered initially. Today's programs struggle to exist in California in an

environment where arts funding has been severely cut and there is a new wave of educational conservatism. These factors contribute to why many artists, myself included, are no longer involved working within the public school system.

Today I run my own program in a media arts center, REACH LA serving local urban youth in Downtown Los Angeles. The focus is on developing young artists and activists by producing arts and social justice projects in web, video, radio, and print media. Projects are by youth designed to speak directly to their peer communities. This program is run in partnership with Pitzer College. At Pitzer our Media Studies program is merged with art, cultural, social studies and urban studies departments. Recently, Pitzer College has been offering a variety of service-learning opportunities for students to take their knowledge and educational resources directly back into the development of local communities. A Media Studies course entitled that I developed four years ago, "Media Arts for Social Justice" requires students to go into the community and teach literacy, and production and with the support of the college, to provide access to media technology. The students work with a wide range of populations, including the youth participants at REACH LA. I am very excited about the whole process. I am finally able to reconcile my two worlds of working with urban youth in the community and teaching at the university level by developing a new generation of young people who are engaged and ready to take on community media work. Hopefully they will become the progressive teachers and artists of the future. Young people who understand how they can use the power of media communication to transform themselves and the world around them.



“Your Turn” Video Art Installation – Gina Lamb and youth Artists from the Jefferson HS Humanitas Program 1992, Foundation For Art Resources, Los Angeles CA

## Visual Embodiment:

I chose this print this photo as it contains a visual reference to many of the issues I touch in this article. This is a photo of one of the students from a Los Angeles High School that I collaborated with to produce a large-scale multimedia/video installation about life in growing up in South Central Los Angeles. His name is Frank Young.

Elements in photo:

- His hat is a Malcom X reference to resistance to status quo hegemony and racism.
- His shirt, an Academic Decathlon logo symbolizes his desire and participation in aspiration towards higher education and academic acceptance.
- The stack of books are outdated American History Textbooks covered with graffiti and borrowed from school classrooms (they were still in use at his high school at the time).
- The television on top of the history textbooks signifies the new “media educator/dictator”
- The video on the screen produced by Frank Young deconstructs racial myths perpetuated by popular media.
- Ideas coming together under the umbrella of Media Arts; Education, Activism and Art

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