Safe Speech
Public Space as a Medium of Democracy

The “Medium is the Message” is an environmental art installation project intended to explore the interrelationship of art and democracy upon the platform of public space. The various attempts at instigating dialogue and public engagement have served to demonstrate Michael Sorkin’s premise that “the accommodation of differences is the key project of contemporary democracy.” This active engagement in contemporary social issues provides a framework for deeper understanding of academic knowledge in the design professions and opens up potential for its future application, unveiling public space as the critical stage upon which positions of identity are established and negotiated.

Architects, landscape architects, and urban planners have the power to alter perception through the formal reconfiguration of space. Often this rearrangement is primarily experienced aesthetically, as a backdrop or setting to specific functions or events. But there are many situations where design does even more to instigate or choreograph human social relations and open up communication between cultures. As educators we are responsible for graduating technically competent and preferably environmentally sensitive future design professionals. Is it also our task to convey this greater sense of social impact to students who may not have yet made the connection between what they devise on the drawing board and the effect of its actual footprint in physical space?

As the global economy shifts and in some places disintegrates, the privatized, corporate clients of the last decades are being replaced with public work and the re-tooling of urban and rural infrastructures to support new goals for more sustainable communities. In conjunction with environmental health, an emphasis on social sustainability—which includes opportunities for cultural expression and democratic debate—is a key factor influencing future strategies for the built world.

To better prepare the next generation of landscape architects for their role in the

If there be time to expose through discussion the falsehoods and the fallacies, to avert the evil by the process of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.


1. Draft protest on the University of Michigan’s Central Campus Diagonal spilling out onto the adjacent city streets, late 1960s. (Bentley Historical Library, UM News & Information Services Collection.)
re-conceptualization of the public realm, a guerilla art installation project titled after the Marshall McLuhan classic, The ‘Medium is the Message’ was assigned for three consecutive years to undergraduate students in the Landscape Design Theory course at the California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly, SLO). Its purpose was to demonstrate to students through real life experience that what they do in their role as designers can have a tangible impact on the societies they design for and that the choices they make can alter the way people perceive and experience their world.

The Quieting of Free Speech on College Campuses

It takes a lot of guts to stand up anonymously in a western democracy and call for things no-one else believes in – like peace and justice and freedom.

—Robert Banks, 2006. Wall and Piece

For the Medium is the Message, students proposed and constructed temporary art installations with the intention of confronting difficult social realities, instigating dialogue, and contributing to a more empowered, interactive public realm. The assignment addressed the art work as an expression of social identity, while exploring its spatial implications, opening up a site of human engagement on a university campus historically known for political apathy and religious conservatism.

The installation projects ask future landscape architects and urban designers to critically examine the role of public space in democratic societies. The pedagogical approach is reinforced by the work of McLuhan, John Dewey, and Henry Giroux, who describe the role of higher education to be substantially more than a transfer station for skills and knowledge; it should serve as a...
laboratory for participatory citizenship in a Democratic society.1

In The Right to the City, Don Mitchell defines two “opposed” and “irreconcilable ideological visions” of public space: the “controlled and orderly retreat” for a “properly behaved public” and an alternative vision that encourages free speech and collective action.2 After discussing traditional approaches to public space in class, including the guidelines for People Places outlined by Clare Cooper Marcus and the theories of William Whyte and Kevin Lynch, and then documenting observational studies of nearby public spaces, the class inevitably concluded that in contemporary society, space that is fixed, “readable,” orderly, and controlled often turns out in many instances to be “dead” and “disinvested,” failing to serve as a catalyst and location for an interactive public culture.3 In response, the student projects typically favored an engaged and interactive public space over one that pacifies the public through neutrality and order.

In the era of Civil Rights, Women’s Rights, Free Speech, and Anti-War movements, college campuses served as theaters for the American conscience. Young adults, the future leaders of law, business, science, and architecture, orchestrated elaborate rituals of protest, displaying the fear and anger of a society resistant to ideas that contradicted its own principles. In response to the protests, many cities and universities adopted more restrictive policies for the use and physical design of public space. Events were increasingly regulated and restricted to approved areas. Plazas and lawns were re-designed for crowd control and surveillance. An example of this is the central quadrangle at the University of Michigan (referred to locally as the Diag), which had served as an open political platform for the entire city during the protest era of the 1960s and 70s and was the historic location of the very first “Teach-Ins” (Figure 1). In the decades since, campus administrators have limited its multiple access points by connecting adjacent buildings across former pathways, altering site amenities to discourage “loitering,” enforcing strict regulations on scheduling, and sanctioning activities (Figure 2).

Over the past several years, Americans have become increasingly anxious about issues that mirror some of the concerns of forty years ago—an unpopular war for uncertain goals, a global environmental crisis, and perceived injustice for the dispossessed: a growing economic underclass. Yet American campuses have been eerily quiet in the face of what some have characterized as unprecedented threats to the American social and economic structure.

In an attempt to elicit the voices and participation of a generation plugged in to iPods and cell phones, students were challenged to co-opt public spaces on the campus of Cal Poly, SLO, envisioning them as media for democratic expression. Their attempts to provoke dialogue and re-activate public engagement in contemporary issues of politics and space were revealing in their complexity, delineating the difference between provocation and abuse and between safety and censorship, illustrating Michael Sorkin’s premise that “the accommodation of differences is the key project of contemporary democracy.”4

Underpinnings

Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART.

—Joseph Beuys, 1973

Forty years ago, Marshall McLuhan proposed that the environment humans create become a medium for defining personal and social identity. In The Medium is the Message, he declares: “We have now become aware of the possibility of arranging the entire human environment as a work of art, as a teaching machine designed to maximize perception and to make everyday learning a process of discovery.”5 Believing that humans in the modern world had become anaesthetized to their physical environments, McLuhan suggested that “anti-environments or counter-situations” constructed by artists could help redirect awareness and “enable us to see and understand more clearly.”6

Aristotle, in Politics, writes that it is specifically the presence of conflict and difference that makes
communicative interaction among citizens necessary to a system of self-government. The essence of democracy stems from the acknowledgement that no consensually agreed upon collective identity can realistically exist. Difference and disagreement are inherently part of a pluralistic society; viewed through this lens, public engagement of contentious issues and conflicting opinions is ultimately the most democratic of acts. According to political theorist Susan Bickford, “[p]olitics . . . is constituted neither by consensus nor community, but by the practices through which citizens argue about interests and ends – in other words by communication.”

For the political scientist Benjamin Barber, “Verbal exchange in public settings must undergird other modes of participation, for it is through such engagement that we sort through conflicting claims about various alternatives and come to a better understanding of the consequences of particular actions . . . we need communicative interaction to help ourselves think publicly about the power we exercise and the decisions to be made.” The student installation projects demonstrate how art employed as a symbolic medium for public narrative can serve as a catalyst to igniting this type of verbal exchange, and in doing so open up the complex issues and ambiguities inherent in social and political identities.

Safe Speech: the Slippery Slope

There is no true freedom without risk.
—Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 1964

“The Medium is the Message” project at Cal Poly, SLO demonstrates to future designers that the public sphere can be a forum for ideas rather than simply a marketplace for consumer goods. First amendment rights on college campuses are often tempered by political correctness, resulting in what has been termed “safe speech.” Although intended to help students feel protected and welcome at the university, such verbal taboos can also prevent difficult dialogue—essential for social change—from occurring.

Over the three-year lifespan of this project, landscape architecture students explored a wide range of topics from Pro-War to No War, Pro-Capitalism to Anti-Commercialization. They have taken on issues such as safe sex, hemp legalization, reproductive rights, migrant labor, agri-business ethics, automobile dependency, and breast implants. The first two years of these projects were documented and analyzed in “Awakening the Public Realm.” Installations considered to be “safe,” that were either physically banal and/or conceptually neutral, did not typically engender...
much engagement or contribute to a re-examination of the status quo. Installations dealing with topics such as world hunger or the commercialization of public space were briefly regarded or ignored entirely. Perhaps not surprisingly, projects more personal and satirical in nature that went beyond the edges of “polite” conversation, ignited waves of reaction and response. The installations that ventured outside the safety zones of personal comfort and political correctness—those that touched upon the immediate issues of everyday student lives—“pushed buttons.” Participants made the same observation as did Alexis de Tocqueville over one hundred sixty-five years ago: “It is very difficult to make the inhabitants of democracies listen when one is not talking about themselves.”

An installation constructed in front of the Agriculture Science Building about chemical additives used in the beef industry (Figure 3) and a scandalous sheep-pen poking fun at fraternity and sorority life on the central lawn (Figure 4) met with heated discussion and months of editorials in the school paper batting issues and perceptions back and forth. The placement and site location for these works were selected not only for their centralized (and so inescapable) visual presence, but also for the typically passive role these spaces play in daily campus life. Typical of the California landscape, public space across the Cal Poly campus is decentralized and dispersed. The goal was to transform the ubiquitous institutional front yard into a social forum for action and ideas. Projects that directly confronted its specific audience with their accepted belief system and opened up alternative perspectives were the most effective at eliciting prolonged debate. As a result, the third set of students to take on this exercise concluded that safe projects, those that were conceptually neutral and intentionally inoffensive, resulted in campus apathy. They approached their issues through the demonstration of views less prone to public passivism. As a result of their activism, strategic evocation of difficult issues, and successful

6. Centerpiece of “Know Your Role,” headless man on a pedestal. By the end of the day, the pedestal and all the space provided around it was filled with comments both condemning the project and appreciating the issues it raised. (Photograph by author.)

7. “Holidays for Sale,” 2004. The crucifixion of the Easter Bunny passed by virtually unnoticed (except by visiting elementary school children eating their lunch) in the hurricane of attention collecting around the controversial gay marriage installation on the Quad. (Photograph by author.)

Safe Speech
transformation of space, this final series of installations caused a wave of “outrage” and dynamic responses.

One group of female students teamed up with a token “male chauvinist” (for consulting purposes) and horrified the Women’s Studies program and the Pride Alliance with Know Your Role. In this assemblage of female mannequins dressed in “traditional women’s roles”—a mother (giving birth), a cook, a shopper, a maid, a beauty queen, and a stripper—all wore graduation caps (Figure 5). Perched above them on a pedestal, a headless male mannequin presided in suit and tie (Figure 6). The text placards displayed sexist jokes and questioned the value of a college education for those whose only interest was marriage and whose career potential was limited at best.

In “Holidays for Sale,” Santa was inserted into a traditional Nativity scene, while a crucified Easter Bunny was attached to the flagpole in Union Plaza (Figure 7). These dialectic devices can be compared to the visual tactics used by the British graffiti artist Robert Banks, whose work operates on simple, yet ideologically unnerving juxtapositions, creating “a mixture of meta-graffiti and wry social commentary . . . a pie in the face of stuffy elitism.”

Through humor, shock, discomfort, and surprise the re-contextualization of these “sacred” (or much-loved) icons was intended to awaken environmental perception and confront the incongruities between symbol and social reality.

The Bunny Crucifix was eclipsed, however, by an even riskier issue: a project addressing same-sex marriage, a topic that had considerable influence that year in state and national elections and has not yet disappeared from political debate. The students involved in this project were neither for nor against gay marriage; they were as yet undecided on the issue. They were opening up questions debated among their own circle of family and friends, and were genuinely contemplating the implications of such a societal shift.

As young people raised with particular values and expectations regarding the role of marriage in the customary formation of community, they wanted to know, “What IS marriage anyway?” The position they demonstrated on the campus quad was one they had encountered in multiple formats: the supposition of the Slippery Slope. “Slippery” thinking proposes that if gay marriages were allowed to occur then the floodgates for the destruction of society (as we know it) would be thrown open and anything could happen next. People would want to marry their siblings, their houses, their automobiles . . . it would make a mockery of the most sacred institution of human civilization. Indeed, during the 2004 elections (the time the final series of installations was installed),
eleven states enacted discriminatory laws banning same-sex marriage on the basis of the implications suggested by the Slippery Slope. Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Ohio, Utah, and Oregon all approved constitutional amendments codifying marriage as an exclusively heterosexual institution justified on the grounds that the union between a man and a woman is the foundational bedrock of society and any deviation would be a threat to Western civilization.

The controversial installation consisted of a staged marriage procession with a linear narrative sequence of literal elements illustrating the consequences to society if gay marriage was permitted. This ran up the center walkway of the Quad and obstructed movement through the main axis (Figure 8). At the front of the procession, a traditional bride and groom were facing a minister with his back turned toward those approaching. Written on the archway of the canopy was the question: “What is marriage anyway?” Proceeding down the aisle other couples were lined up waiting to be married: first two grooms, then a groom and two brides, and finally, a groom and a dog dressed as his bride (Figure 9). With each passing couple, the ground plane shifted, the floor shattered, the earth crumbled, and the pews broke apart. The world as we knew it was coming undone.

As the students completed their project, they decided to erect comment boards to invite response and debate. We imagined there would be a reaction. We did not imagine the degree to which this project would catalyze dialogue about the role of education, democracy, and free speech. A handful of commentators applauded and affirmed the ideas expressed by the illustrated Slippery Slope, but the overwhelming majority was in support of gay marriage and contested the message of the installation (Figure 10). Even in those first few hours, before the camera crews and the community activists came, there were more people on the Quad than I had ever seen assembled there before—and more gay and lesbian students than anyone had ever realized were on campus. People were not only looking and writing, they were talking to each other, to people they did not even know, about the nature of love and marriage, the evolution of society, and the danger of intolerance. Others, on a different side of the debate, also voiced their questions and concerns through rational discourse. This spontaneous dynamic illustrated Bickford’s definition of interactive communication that “inherently presupposes different beings and the possibility of something between them.” Bickford defines the act of communication as “an effort that acknowledges a more-than-one, a separateness, a difference that may be the source of conflict, and at the same time foregrounds the possibility of...”
bridging that gap by devising a means of relatedness.¹⁶ The “What is Marriage Anyway?,” project, was a successful vehicle in bringing all sides to the table to express their differences, but also to voice their concerns, proclaim their ideals and find their common humanity.

There was no violence, no vandalism, just deep and heated discussion (Figure 11). For the political scientist Benjamin Barber, it is precisely this level of democratic discourse that transforms conflict, since it allows participants to understand themselves and their own viewpoints in relation to those of others. By publicly addressing social conflict, one is made aware of being a part of the political community. This experience often sets the foundation for continued participation and investment in public life. The political debate, though uncomfortable, seemed to be progressing quite reasonably until the Director of the University Pride Alliance informed Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender (LGTB) organizations across Central California that a “homophobic hate project promoted by Professor Beth Diamond” was on campus and provided contact information encouraging people to let me know their outrage.

Many condemned the students’ work for its potential to instigate violence. But what the campus community witnessed instead was pure political mobilization and activism. Perhaps this is because those who were in agreement with the message of the installation did not feel that their personal belief system was under attack and had no particular need to strike out in some type of surreptitious counter-demonstration. In the past, there have been occasional intolerant and aggressive acts committed against the gay community on campus—but, interestingly enough, these were in response to affirmative demonstrations of identity carried out by gay student organizations, such as the same-sex hand holding event on Valentine’s Day in 2003 when the LGBT club booth was bombarded with eggs.

In the What is Marriage Anyway? project, it could be argued that the public realm was made safer through public exposure to and confrontation with what were considered “unsafe” ideas. The area surrounding the installation became a free and open forum for dialogue protected by the presence of a participating public.

In fact, as the process unfolded, the strength, visibility, unity, and activism of the gay and lesbian population came into its own in a way never before experienced in the community. As the complaints escalated, I invited everyone who felt damaged or insulted by the installation to participate in a class discussion on the What is Marriage Anyway? project and the issues it represented. Word passed along the electronic grapevine and people packed into the large lecture hall, covering the floor and spilling out the doorway. The five students who constructed the project stood in front of the crowd and made a formal statement. They apologized for any hurt they had caused and explained the meaning and intention behind what they had done. In this challenging and at times openly hostile context, these students had the conviction to reveal their vulnerabilities and uncertainties as they approached the situation with open minds willing to take responsibility for the impact of their actions.

The one question everybody wanted to know was “what were the students’ real intentions?” Did they truly believe that same-sex marriage would lead to social disintegration or were they doing it to provoke a reaction? The truth is more complex than a simple choice between ignorance and manipulation. The students were aware that they were displaying an extreme and irrational point of view and that it was almost certain to provoke response. But despite their outwardly progressive appearance, these young adults were genuinely questioning the repercussions of such a revolutionary shift in social structure. In doing so they endured being ostracized from friends and classmates and ideological battering from the campus community at large. The fallout from the project shattered their previous perceptions and put them face-to-face with answers to their questions and to the real human beings represented by their wooden cutouts. Whatever the students’ initial beliefs, it is certain they were fundamentally changed through this experience. The conceptual artist Joseph Beuys once argued: “Real future political intentions must be artistic. This means that they must originate from human creativity, from the individual freedom of man.”¹⁷ Only in this way can philosophical transformations in social consciousness be genuine and potentially
life-changing, since they emanate from the core of human perception.

Many who attended the large gathering were more interested in telling their stories of fear and discrimination than in listening to reasons why the students approached this topic as they did; that was also important. Each person told the story of his/her committed relationship and what it would mean to be accepted into the larger social framework as well as how it feels to be shut out. This was a prelude to the protest rally at the installation site scheduled to take place immediately after the class. There, a much larger crowd was gathered on the Quad along with television crews and campus police. In the span of two days, a serious grass roots movement was formed, united around the determination to be seen as equal citizens in a shared definition of love. The installation was taken down that evening, but provoked a series of events in its wake.

Professors from all over campus—including representatives from political science, sociology, psychology, argumentation, ethics, architectural history, women's studies, and art & design—used the installations as the subject of lectures focusing on relevant issues in their respective fields. Many held their classes on sites where projects were located to generate dialogue—proving again their effectiveness as catalysts for debate. A continuing series of discussion panels and university events were set up to explore the topics of free speech, gay marriage, campus "safety," censorship, and the role of art in democratic societies. Several groups collaborated on designing, funding, and constructing a follow-up counter-installation to demonstrate a position in favor of gay marriage on the former site of the marriage procession.

In attending the LGB&TB group's weekly meeting soon after the protest, I was genuinely surprised when student after student shared with the group that even though the message was painful, the project sounded a critical alarm and was ultimately the "best thing that could have happened" for mobilizing local political advocacy groups on gay rights initiatives. The project brought these issues to the attention of everyone and made them important. It rallied the gay community, allies and supporters together around a common cause and more importantly, committed them to real action. After a front-page article in the local news came out dealing with the controversy, the Chair of the Academic Senate emailed to thank me:

I am gay myself and more experienced in gay politics than many of the people who will be venting on this issue. The fact that we are having a discussion on this issue is a great step forward from where we as gay people were just a few years ago... It would have been very difficult for the gay community on our own to get that much positive publicity on this issue... Too many people fall into the victim role and do not realize that we come out of these controversies and discussions closer to our goals.

Students within the department and across campus were ultimately the strongest champions of free speech. Despite community concern for their malleable minds, they did not see themselves as impressionable children in need of ethical guidance. In a survey conducted by the Pride Alliance in front of the What is Marriage Anyway? project, an overwhelming majority of respondents were in favor of the free and uncensored expression and exchange of ideas despite the biased language of the survey that asked viewers whether they found such displays offensive. Students across campus articulated the need to be treated as adults and regarded the freedom to express their opinions, questions and concerns uncensored by anyone as part of their fundamental rights as democratic citizens particularly within the context of a public university.

Reflections on Pedagogy

Propaganda ends where dialogue begins.
—Marshall McLuhan, 1967
Critics of the installation projects believed it was my duty to ensure the safety and ideological comfort of the campus environment by censoring “inappropriate” work and providing moral guidance to the confused and impressionable minds in my charge. The designers of the What is Marriage Anyway? project were warned that if they were to execute their proposal in the public realm, they would need to be prepared to face those who disagreed with the installation’s graphic statement. The team received a strong indication of what that response might entail through the objections and critique of their classmates during the proposal stage. But I could no more forbid the team to open this particular Pandora’s Box than block students from constructing an installation that championed gay marriage.

The repeating chorus of outside commentators insisted that a college campus must be a safe place where no one should feel challenged or uncomfortable about who she is or how others regard her—a sheltered oasis keeping out the mean, the unjust, and the insensitive. If higher education is intended to prepare young adults for their future roles as leaders of society, how is that accomplished if societal issues and conflicts are kept at bay? What happens when these protected students encounter real prejudices and obstacles upon entering “the real world”? What skills have they developed to change the status quo? By keeping them safe, have we in essence disempowered them and made them more vulnerable?

In his 1916 treatise on Democracy and Education, John Dewey promoted the concept “Learn By Doing” (coincidentally the official Cal Poly school motto) as a strategy for preparing children and young adults to participate as critical thinkers and leaders in a democratic society. Active engagement in contemporary social issues provides a framework for a deeper understanding of academic knowledge and a critical map for its future application. Such experiences provide essential skills for coping with and transforming conflict. Extreme views can be important catalysts for more complex and reasoned debates. Difficult questions need to be asked and established orders need to be challenged if we as a society and democracy as a political construct are to continue to evolve. If not confronted openly in public space, discontentment and agitation fester and eventually erupt in unexpected and often violent ways.

Michael Sorkin argues: “If the individuality of individuals is to be safeguarded, it will depend on providing them with a place—a kind of ground.”

Public space is the central stage upon which positions of identity are established and negotiated in a democratic society. Sorkin believes that space in this capacity is more than just an image or a metaphor. Propinquity—physically being together in space—is itself necessary for democracy. “Freedom of speech . . . means freedom to address others, to be heard. One cannot be free alone.”

Public Space as a Medium for Democracy

He that would make his own liberty secure must guard even his enemy from oppression; for if he violates this duty, he establishes a precedent that will reach himself.

—Thomas Paine, 1791.

Dissertation on First Principles of Government.

The galvanization of the LGBT community in response to the What is Marriage Anyway? project was an immediate activation and transformation of public space, becoming an environmental nucleus for discussion, protest and counter-installations. The build-up and variety of experiences that had culminated in the uproar over the Marriage project left imprints on the activist imaginations of the greater student population. Both in groups and independently, a diversity of interests from across the university began to borrow public art strategies first demonstrated by the landscape architecture students for their own political agendas, sometimes simply appropriating campus space rather than going through the red tape to schedule it (Figure 12). This practice has continued even after the guerilla art installations ceased to be part of the Landscape Theory curriculum.

In striking contrast to events at Cal Poly, SLO, the parameters for “The Medium is the Message” at the University of Michigan are significantly more restrictive. Committed to “preventing what happened in the 60s from ever happening again,”
a retinue of facilities administrators, campus security agents and grounds crews have imposed strict limitations on site options, scheduling, dimensions and materials. The guerilla tactics of anonymous overnight construction have been replaced with full detail disclosure well in advance of the event, including formal press releases, and email and web page announcements containing the students’ names, concept statements, and images of their proposals. The university wants to incontrovertibly communicate that the projects are the product of a class assignment and the work has been permitted to exist for this reason only. Other students and community members may not use campus public space for similar purposes. Even under close bureaucratic supervision, the project proposals need to be submitted to a campus planning committee before they are officially approved. Because the Landscape Architecture program is housed in a School of Natural Resources, the current Dean has requested that the content of the installations be restricted to environmental issues.

In their current configurations, the installation projects on the Michigan campus have taken on the gospel of sustainability through an Andy Goldsworthy lens, producing works that have been both visually beautiful and intellectually intriguing (Figures 13 and 14). As a design exercise they continue to be immensely valuable for providing students with the experience of transforming a modeled concept into a human-scaled outdoor intervention and for all the important lessons such a project entails. However, the principle of social engagement—so critical to the theoretical intentions of the original assignment—has been neutralized by restrictions on expression, content and location. The power inherent in artistic communication to speak to this astonishingly diverse, intellectually prolific, international community of scholars upon the platform of public space has been institutionally castrated out of existence.

The installation projects are a catalyst to re-examining the role of public space in democratic societies. The two different institutional settings provide two different approaches and interpretations to what such space can be. At the scale of the mid-sized state school historically noted for its conservatism and political apathy, the installation projects cleared a path to greater and greater freedoms for political expression including issues regarding site selection, content and strategies for engagement. As the stakes escalated, the campus community became both immersed and seduced by the potential power of public space as a platform to take issues and ideas into the public realm through the medium of art. Its ultimate success lay in the fact that eventually the activity was taken over from the “professionals” and re-invented by the public at large. This is in keeping with the philosophies of Joseph Beuys who believed that “This most modern art discipline—Social Sculpture/Social Architecture—will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor or architect of the social organism.”

At the scale of an enormous world-class university with a celebrated reputation for political activism, public space today is more akin to that found in private corporate settings, carefully controlled and regulated and drained of any content that might discourage financial investment. Participation is restricted to those with “professional” credentials (or in this case, those who are legitimately engaged in supervised professional training) and the general public is given clear signals that they are welcome to look but may not create any such visual statements for themselves. Although the topic of the environment is noble and important, focusing on that theme without addressing underlying social and cultural issues distances the viewer from the subject, making it something “outside” of his personal experience and concern. The concept conveyed is not specifically targeted at the individual, and for that reason the intervention loses its power to ignite strong feeling, reaction and response. The artwork becomes something to consume visually, but not partake in, and this defeats Sorkin’s call for propinquity, for a physical space where positions of identity can be expressed and debated, and where injustices and embedded values can be exposed and confronted.

In the 1980s, a decade politically congruent with the recently elected Republican administration, artists Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger co-opted graphic strategies of advertising and mass media to subvert social programming.
and implicate the viewer in the work of art. The success of their work in penetrating the materialist fabric of their generation lay in a conscious strategy of confrontation. “Holzer’s public art is not meant to decorate the urban landscape but rather elicit and provoke public discourse.”24 She does this by airing her “expressionist screams of personal or social pain” in the physical context of public space and not simply permitting, but prodding the public to scream back.25 By using public space to voice private fears, a physical place for both civic communication and community action is mapped out and ultimately invigorated.

In training future architects, landscape architects, and urban planners to envision public space as a platform for collective action and democratic communication, students can be empowered to engage society in new ways, to incorporate ordinary citizens as sculptors of the social organism and to help lead a reconfiguration of community interaction. These skills will be important to tackle the new set of social and environmental challenges this next generation will face. Often public space is not so much a center for social ritual and cultural exchange as it is a commercial or institutional front yard. Giving students the opportunity to go beyond function and visual aesthetics to take on the role of social instigator, opens a door to using art, and by extension design, as a voice for social transformation and a vehicle through which to re-imagine the built world.

Acknowledgments
This paper is dedicated to all the students who have taken risks and instigated dialogue in the Landscape Theory installation projects at Cal Poly, SLO and especially to Marisa, Marko, Matt, Mike, and Pelt for asking difficult questions and opening their hearts to the big lessons.

Notes
6. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
20 Ibid., p. 11.
21. Off the record quote from anonymous facilities administrator at the university.
25 Ibid., p. 20.