

New Urban Arts

Our First Year

October 24, 2005

Marcus Civin and Tyler Denmead

**A conversation about the first year of New Urban Arts between Marcus Civin and Tyler Denmead.**

**Marcus Civin:**

It's great to be here at New Urban Arts. This space has been useful to many people. You can tell being in it. Every corner and floorboard has been worked--used as the site of a conversation that made room for the next one. When we moved into this space, we were in something beyond our means and our skills, if not beyond our imagination.

**Tyler Denmead:**

What stands out to you now about New Urban Arts?

**MC:**

It is a safer space because there is more support for it. We dealt with some tough times at the beginning. We had our champions for sure; but sometimes people who didn't know us wouldn't bother to show up for meetings. That doesn't happen so much anymore. And there are more young people signing up as we speak! Now there are great and creative terms for organizational trends that were then just things that a few students and mentors liked to do. We liked Dada/surrealist games: We would create group works by passing a paper from person to person for each person to add to the work at intervals. We never wanted to censor what anyone had to say. I remember a certain student making very violent work. I made a response piece that explored one of this student's violent situations from a different point of view. The student then explored the difference between the works in yet another work. Now a community of people owns and incorporates strategies like these. We always said we would know this was a vital program when former students started running it. There were moments when we had hints that that could happen. Now it is the reality.

**TD:**

What do you remember about our beginning?

**MC:**

I think, Tyler, you and I were growing into ourselves as artists and as adults. These are ongoing narratives. We knew then we wanted to be capable of mature relationships. One way we tried to understand mature relationships was by asking what made them work and attempting to model that. You and I met in a context of a lot of growth; sometimes there was anxiety around that growth. We were both involved in performance art, risky pieces largely about transformation. And, this was taking place in 1996, at the end of Clinton's 1st presidency. Clinton's Americorps program, despite its problems, was a sign of hope for us. We saw evidence that discussions around social change could be transformed into real change.

**TD:**

The beginning was certainly a process for me of coming to understand the type of relationships that I wanted/needed, the type of life I wanted to live, and the aspirations I had for the world.

**MC:**

I remember sitting in your dorm room and you asking me what was my radical model of education. You asked me what had failed in other educational programs I'd worked in and where could we go from there? Up to that point in my life, no one had really spoken to me that

way. Reading helped me: Robert Henri, Ben Shahn, June Jordan, Herbert Kohl, Sapphire. I was also influenced by Ted Sizer's lectures at Brown about the Essential Schools Movement. In our program, we wanted student and mentor to have equal power to determine the relationship. We knew good teachers, role models, programs that taught art skills. Yet, we felt we were articulating something that was missing. On top of that, you and I were learning to paint, having come to it late, from different areas. I was a theater major. I felt we had something universal to say about the human condition that could be expressed immediately in paint. We would filter our statements through personal experience. It didn't matter so much the skill of the painting - at least at the beginning.

**TD:**

I struggled with how to value, and therefore understand the teaching art. If art is a valuable object, then the artist must have the necessary skills to create it. If art is a process in which we come to understand, reinvent, imagine something bigger than ourselves, and become something new, then skills aren't really that important - I guess, unless they are to you. We valued the extent to which art was expressive, immediate, and authentic. I was going to be a doctor, a chef, an author, or a teacher. I couldn't imagine working in a school. I remember that we talked a lot about creating "safe spaces" where young people could take risks and push themselves.

My first memory of that taking place in a transformative way was a writing session in our first space at Grace Church. Brian Zimblar, Sarah Leddy, and Orlando... I also think Kwajo may have been there too. We each took so many risks that day. And, it was a dynamic of learning together in a way that I had never been a part of. We didn't know where we would end up. It was confusing, at first. There was genuine interest and care for what we shared with each other. We also pushed each other.

**MC:**

The subject of risk-taking is important. What do you remember about how we pushed each other and how that was helpful?

**TD:**

I remember talking about how confusion and uncertainty are great places for learning to begin. We used to start projects without knowing where they would finish. We allowed the projects to change and they were driven by some collective and open inquiry. We also embraced mistake and failure in art, because we found beauty and new, unforeseen possibilities in them - allowing the learner to see themselves in ways that they might not have before.

We also tried to establish a way of interacting with one another that we struggled to find at our school, and that our students struggled to find in their school - where we provided a place for us to be vulnerable, somehow removing the everyday veneer and just be ourselves. This allowed us to acknowledge one another in a way that was deeply felt. And from this place of security and strength, we then asked hard questions of one another.

This process is a huge risk. In some weird way, it can be easier to be who we are made out to be. If I'm treated like the tough kid, then I'm going to stare people down. If I'm treated like the kid who can't read, then I'm not going to pick up a book. I think we tried to eliminate those perceptions, and just allowed people to come as they are. Sometimes it took months and sometimes it never happened, but I can remember those moments when the veneer did drop with some of our students, and for me as well. It was quite beautiful.

**MC:**

Remember Kwajo Ankoma, he had been carrying Spiderman comics in a backpack for years. Kwajo copied them and copied them. Xmen too. Just now, we were talking about how skills didn't matter to us so much, but I thought Kwajo was great at drawing and I wanted to learn from

him. Orlando was from a program with whom we partnered. Orlando was not much younger than we were; he'd already run into some trouble, been held back in school and pegged as a problem. We created a space with Orlando where he wasn't judged. At the same time, I'd been a rule-follower most of my life. I was impressed by Orlando's experience and regret now that I idealized that experience to some extent.

**TD:**

I think as much as we thought we were teaching and learning art on students' terms, as we aspired to, we weren't. We also were teaching and learning on our terms.

**MC:**

In a way. We asked students to talk about family and how cruel the world was. These things became their concerns because they were interested in us. They're not bad concerns to have, but they were our concerns to start with. Tyler, I'm interested in hearing more about how the students determine the future at New Urban Arts now. You were telling me before about how students function in the hiring process.

**TD:**

This is an interesting topic... "Youth voice" is often discussed as an indicator of the strength of youth development organizations. Yet, I think these strategies often get a bit carried away, and rarely put in the resources and support that is needed for them to be successful.

We have avoided building some of the traditional standing structures that exist in youth development organizations – youth councils, advisory boards – and have even been hesitant to engage youth in community planning efforts, councils or board outside the organization. Oftentimes, this is more about adults than it is kids - and the opportunity for learning and growth is often not as great than in our studio.

Some informal pathways of youth leadership and ownership have emerged, which I think is more consistent with our organization. For example, young people sit on the hiring committees for full-time staff and artist mentors. They review the applications, they lead the interviews, etc. Also, alumni become artist mentors, full-time staff people, and board members. So, their perspectives contribute at every level of staffing and governing the organization.

I'll never forget after student-led interviews for artist mentors, a student said, "Can you imagine how different school would be if we hired the teachers?" Each time I engage youth in hiring artist mentors and allow them to make the decisions, a whisper in the back of my head tells me that I shouldn't do this. That it won't work... That it requires my experience, perspective, etc. And, every time this voice is proven wrong.

Our students understand this community and they know which artist mentors will be effective. I walk away from these interviews each year trusting that New Urban Arts is on such a solid foundation, because generations of young people in our studio consistently value selection of artist mentors based on criteria that I always hoped would be used to select them – willingness to take risks, flexibility, ability to inspire and meaningfully connect, and create rich, beautiful artwork. And, their perspective on hiring artist mentors is rooted in the positive experiences they have had here – not on a list of criteria that is provided to them.

In addition, as you have described, the relationship between the students and artist mentors is always a negotiation. Artist mentors rely on student feedback and input to shape their initiatives in the studio. Artist mentors do not write up successful curriculum at home and then implemented in our studio. Rather, they shape and tweak it with students as they work together. In some ways, we established this pedagogy in our dorm rooms at Brown. In other ways, students have just demanded it, and we have responded. Sometimes, I can't tell which came first.

Students' voices are also the most important factor in helping the organization plan for the long-term. We simply don't make decisions if we haven't talked to young people first. It is about ownership and empowerment, but it's also just smart. Young people are this organization's

“customers” (for a lack of a better word) and we trust that they know what direction this organization should head in. It sounds easy... It’s easy to say. But, it’s not. We don’t live in a culture that has ever trusted youth, which is a prerequisite for caring about them. Ask the educational establishment.

**MC:**

How much of the students’ interest in us at the beginning was because we seemed so strange? Sarah Leddy choreographed dances she and I would perform for the students. We moved our bodies in bizarre ways. It’s hard to imagine what other people were thinking 8 years ago. I wish Kwajo was here.

Oh my god, Kwajo actually just walked in! No kidding. I’m crying.