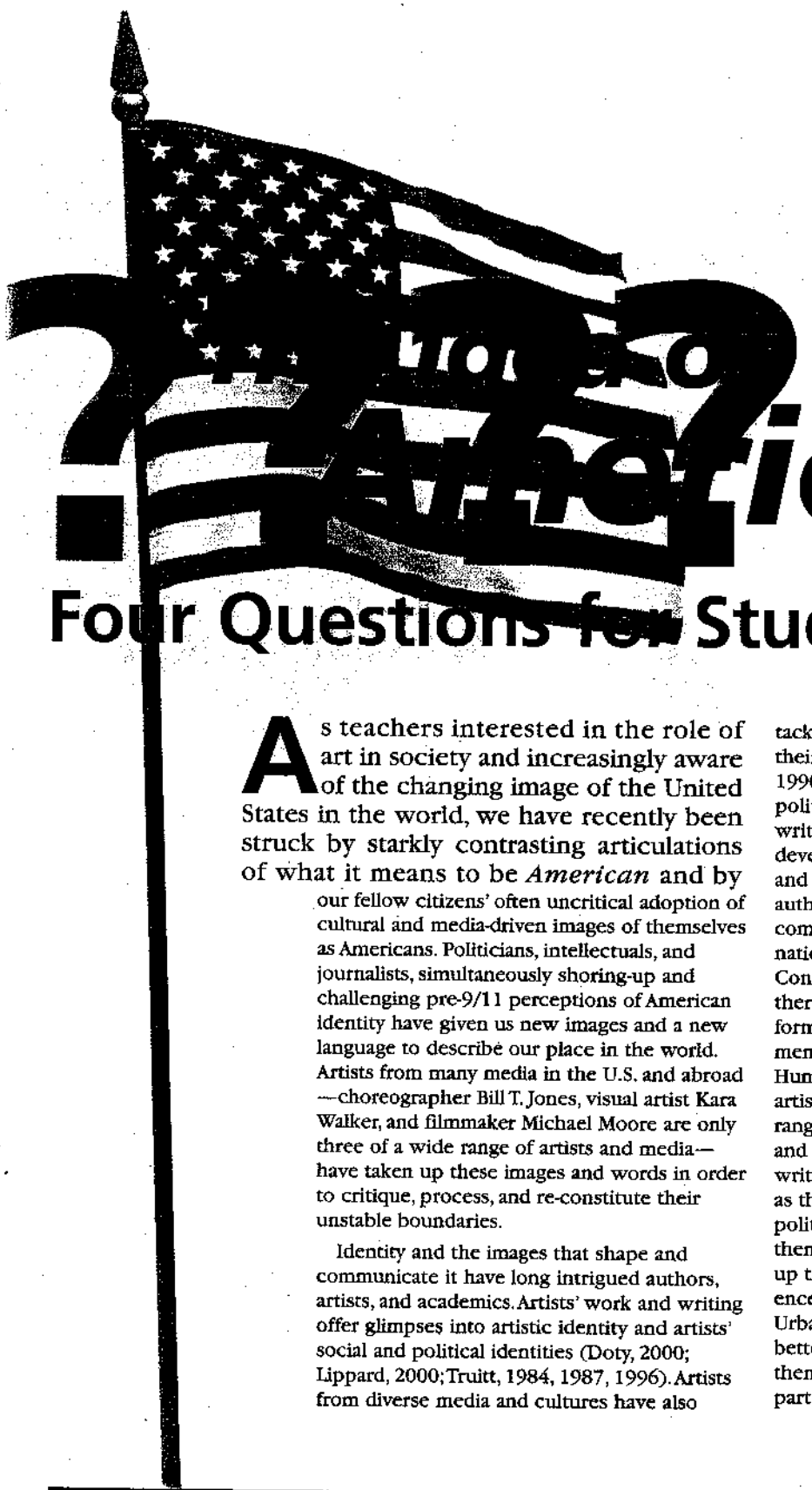

America?

Four Questions for Student Artists

As teachers interested in the role of art in society and increasingly aware of the changing image of the United States in the world, we have recently been struck by starkly contrasting articulations of what it means to be *American* and by our fellow citizens' often uncritical adoption of cultural and media-driven images of themselves as Americans. Politicians, intellectuals, and journalists, simultaneously shoring-up and challenging pre-9/11 perceptions of American identity have given us new images and a new language to describe our place in the world. Artists from many media in the U.S. and abroad —choreographer Bill T. Jones, visual artist Kara Walker, and filmmaker Michael Moore are only three of a wide range of artists and media— have taken up these images and words in order to critique, process, and re-constitute their unstable boundaries.

Identity and the images that shape and communicate it have long intrigued authors, artists, and academics. Artists' work and writing offer glimpses into artistic identity and artists' social and political identities (Doty, 2000; Lippard, 2000; Truitt, 1984, 1987, 1996). Artists from diverse media and cultures have also tackled the complexity of national identity in their artwork (Deveare Smith, 1994; Reagan, 1990; Rinder, 2003). Since the rise of identity politics in the mid 1980s, much has been written about identity formation and how developing a distinct identity moves individuals and communities toward action. A range of authors has examined how marginalized communities relate their individual identities to national identity (Anzaldua, 1999; Library of Congress, 2003; Rodriguez, 1983). In addition, there has been significant recent interest in the formation of civic identity and civic engagement in young people (Boyte and Kari, 2000; Humphreys, 2000; Sax, 2000). However, while artists and academics have produced a wide range of work trying to understand national and individual identity, very little has been written about the experiences of student artists as they work to make sense of their particular political, social, and artistic identities and put them to work in the world. This article takes up that question, examining student experiences in the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs' (HECUA) City Arts program to better understand how students come to see themselves as artists active in the world and as part of the idea of *America*.

BY CHRISTA OLSON AND WILLIAM REICHARD

City Arts is an experiential off-campus study program for undergraduate students offered by HECUA, a consortium of colleges and universities whose mission is to engage students, faculty, and practitioners in exceptional learning opportunities, providing tools and knowledge to participate in community-building and social transformation. City Arts fulfills that mission by exploring how art and culture impact communities, and the role of creative work (performance, writing, visual art) in addressing pressing social issues. Every year, approximately 15 undergraduates take part in the City Arts program. They receive a full semester's credit through a combination of classroom study, field experiences, and internships. Most of the students self-identify as artists. Students enroll in the program because they care about social justice, want to put their education to use in the world beyond college, and are drawn to the power of creative expression.

During the semester, students immerse themselves in the thriving artistic and cultural communities of the Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota metropolitan area. This region has shown remarkable growth in the number of working artists over the last two decades. Between 1980 and 1990, there was a 56% jump in the number of working artists in the region, accounting for a 20% change in the total labor force (Markusen & King, 2003). The region boasts impressive arts and cultural institutions, including the Walker Art Center, Guthrie Theater, and Minnesota Orchestra; several nonprofit presses, including Graywolf Press, Coffeehouse Press, and Milkweed Editions; and an abundance of nonprofit community arts organizations, such as Intermedia Arts, ForeCast Public Artworks, The Loft Literary Center, and Juxtaposition Arts. [AH2]In addition, the region is home to several nationally recognized foundations known for their support for the arts, including The Bush Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, and Jerome Foundation. For their internships, students may choose among positions with many of these organizations and have opportunities to mentor with individual artists in a variety of media.

In the 2003-2004 academic year, City Arts underwent a major revision to more clearly address new work in the arts and a rapidly changing social context. The attacks of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath were still fresh in the public consciousness, national news bore constant reminders of the War on Terror, and the war in Iraq had changed from a short skirmish to a long-term battle. From our position as educators immersed in the arts, we watched the art world foreshadow, echo, and reverberate with these powerful political events.

We crafted four critical questions that challenge students to expand and negotiate their own ideas of America. *These questions—What is* American? *Who are American artists (or artists in America)? What are the politics of artistic production? and Who can claim America?—gave the semester direction and catalyzed student growth.*

As PBS broadcast an American Masters documentary entitled *Miller, Kazan, and the Blacklist: None Without Sin* (Epstein, 2003), the U.S. Congress approved the Patriot Act and the Justice Department proposed programs which would have encouraged average citizens to monitor and report on the activities of their neighbors.[1] Oxford University Press and The Whitney Museum of American Art both published comprehensive texts looking at the history of 20th-century American art in the context of political, cultural and social events. Concurrently, in 2003, the New Press released a version of Howard Zinn's 1980 book, *A People's History of the United States*, updated to include the Clinton presidency, the 2000 election, and the "War on Terrorism." While the U.S. launched the invasion of Iraq, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City mounted an exhibit entitled *The American Effect: Global Perspectives on the United States 1990 to 2003* (2003) presenting artists from around the world whose work reflects on the impact of *America*—both as an idea and as a nation—on the rest of the world, and Dinesh D'Souza explored that same impact of America in his book, *What's So Great About America* (2002).

This ferment of artistic, cultural, and political circumstances underscored our belief that all artistic production functions in the public sphere. We believe that our students, as artists and as world citizens, have something to say about what it means to be *American* and that they play a role in shaping that meaning. We wanted both to create a space for analysis and to challenge students to take an active stance in producing *America*.

To create space for inquiry and analysis, we crafted four critical questions that challenge students to expand and negotiate their own ideas of America. These questions—What is *American*? Who are American artists (or artists in America)? What are the politics of artistic production? and Who can claim America?—gave the semester direction and catalyzed student growth. In this article, we address each question's genesis, incarnation in the classroom, and impact on students. We show the intellectual and social potential of asking students to grapple with the idea of *America*, and trace how that exploration fosters students' self-identification as artists and as citizens.

What is *American*?

Our investigation of what it means to be *American* started with definitions proposed by both mainstream and marginalized voices. We reviewed historic texts that have defined America politically and socially (de Tocqueville, 1990; Heffner, 1991). We also engaged contemporary authors looking at U.S. history and culture including Howard Zinn (2003), Ann Coulter (2003), Dinesh D'Souza (2002), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995). We combined these political perspectives with perspectives from art history and cultural studies as articulated by Erika Doss (2003), Virginia Dominguez (2000), Lynne Cheney (1995), Adrienne Rich (2001), and the Whitney Museum of American Art (Rinder, 2003). These readings helped students develop context for the idea of America and offered examples of how diverse authors articulate *America* from a variety of political, social, and economic positions.

We started our discussion of "What is *American*" by asking students to define their own *American* identity and consider how it affected their identity as artists. They began with a "free write." Their initial discomfort was clear. When we asked them to share what they had written, it was obvious that many of our students were uncomfortable calling themselves *American*. They raised concerns about what they saw as a call for patriotism based on a sharply and narrowly defined sense of what it means to be *American*. They volunteered their own experiences to reveal inconsistencies and erasures in the picture of America drawn both by Al Qaeda terrorists and officials in the U.S. Government. Several students reminded their classmates that the commonly used definition of *America* itself requires a massive erasure of our neighbors to the north and south who also live in America yet are not U.S. citizens. Sarah's[2] response was fairly typical. A studio art and psychology major, Sarah talked about her desire to join the Peace Corps after graduation in order to get out of the United States and away from an American culture she found embarrassing in its pervasive arrogance and greed. After listening to several of his classmates express similar frustrations about injustice and oppression in the United States, Michael, an Eritrean refuge, spoke up. While he applauded their concern for justice and their high expectations of their own country, he also reminded them, by telling his own stories, that their lives as U.S. citizens gave them privileges and opportunities that also carry responsibility.

Struck by the insights of her classmates, by readings such as Ivan Illich's "To Hell With Good Intentions" (1990), and by her experiences at her internship, Sarah began to consider the relationship between her desire to do international justice work and her growing recognition that there is justice work to do in her own community. As an intern at the Highpoint Center for Printmaking, Sarah worked with K-12 students from the Twin Cities' urban core, introducing them to printmaking and helping them use this form to make art about their own lives. As Sarah reflected on the question "What is *American*?" and taught students the power of art, she found her own identity as an artist and an American strengthened. Sarah was clearly coming to see her artistic and activist identities wrapped up in her work in her own community. In class, as we discussed the links between justice and art in America, her struggles about vocation turned into a conviction that her best role as an artist and educator was to work with young people in the United States. When she graduates, Sarah plans to apply to Teach for America and use her new artistic and American identity to shape more young people's learning. Instead of focusing on how the definition of "American" has been used to exclude certain groups of people, Sarah used her internship and her creative work in class to reclaim an America that defined the life experiences of her students and her own life experiences as essential.

Who are American artists? or Who are artists in America?

It was clear early on that our initial framing question "Who are American artists?" needed to be divided into two questions. First, these two questions highlight the delineation between those perceived as legitimate citizens and those seen as outsiders or interlopers in the American sphere. Second, they encompass a constant negotiation between whom the broader culture sees as a legitimate "artist" and who has access to the tools necessary to become such an artist. They brought us back to some of our "What is *American*?" readings and led us to authors such as Lucy Lippard (2000), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (2000), bell hooks (1995), Mark Doty (2000), and José Quiroga (2001).

To understand the identity of artists in America, we moved through U.S. history and art history from the last century, starting with the initiation of a particularly American aesthetic in art articulated by cultural luminaries such as Alfred Stieglitz, Georgia O'Keeffe, and the Ash Can school. At the same time, we met with Anita Gonzalez, curator at the Minnesota Museum of American Art and studied artists highlighted in Lippard's *Mixed Blessings* (2000) to consider the presence and absence of people of color, women, and working class artists in canons of American Art. We asked students to juxtapose artists in the traditional canon with artists highlighted by Gonzalez and Lippard, to understand the stylistic, socio-economic, and subjective foci of these works. The insights students found pointed to a particular definition of *American* art, designed to exclude minority, oppositional, and revolutionary voices. Context (the Stieglitz Circle developed its American ethic prior to and during wartime) helped explain this exclusive construction, but students were left to puzzle over how this system continues to operate well beyond the crisis of World War I, and examine the impact of arts movements (e.g. the New Negro, Feminist art, and Black arts movements) that have challenged that system.

The article suggested that economic class is not what keeps working class people from "high art" consumption. Rather, social *class determines whether people feel comfortable visiting certain cultural institutions. Taking up these issues, we asked students to create reflective pieces (stories, images, essays) that assessed how their own class backgrounds affected their experiences with the arts.*

While we interrogated these historical trends, students took part in a workshop with photographer Wing Young Huie. Wing is a well-known figure in the local art scene, having produced both large-scale, public installations and monographs about marginalized Twin Cities populations. Though Wing's subject matter is generally regarded as "political," Wing refuses definition as a "political" artist, insisting that the political interpretation of his work is projected onto it only after it is produced. Our students were confounded by Wing. He is a Chinese-American artist whose subjects are easily read as "minorities." In the construct of our research, he would clearly fall into the circle of artists identified by Lippard and Gonzalez, yet he refuses such labels. Going into the workshop, we knew Wing would challenge our students' well-intentioned sense of art and social justice. The issues he raised remained an important and unresolved part of our discussions about *American* artists.

Michael, the Eritrean student mentioned earlier, also embodied the complex and contradictory nature of being an artist in America. In Eritrea, Michael was an author, actor, and journalist. After being imprisoned for writing that was perceived as anti-governmental literature, he fled to the United States as a refugee. Part of his American experience is an opportunity to reclaim his artistic and civic voice.

Michael is not a citizen of the United States, yet his work here embodies an American experience. Michael's internship was at a nonprofit community radio station where he produced an Eritrean history and culture program offering a picture of Eritrea deeper than recent histories of civil war and ethnic strife. His program was not a call to other Eritreans to return to their home county. Rather, it filled in personal and social histories for Eritreans forging new lives in the United States. Michael was speaking to *American* Eritreans, helping them better understand their experiences here by understanding their history in Eritrea. Through his program, Michael positioned the American Eritrean community as one particular image of *America*. The *America* broadcast through his program was made *American* by immigrant experience, holding in tension life here and in Eritrea.

What are the politics of artistic production?

This question arose from an interest in funding policies, political censorship, and the relationships among artists, artwork, and audiences. We asked, "To whom is art available?" and "How is American art and culture marketed, and to whom?" Again, several texts shaped our conversations, including Michael Brenson's *Visionaries and Outcasts* (2001), Marc Blitzstein's *The Cradle Will Rock* (1938), Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1995), Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002), Anna Deveare Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles 1992* (1994), and Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2002).

The question of not only who is *financially* able to access art, but also, who is *culturally* prepared or given permission to relate to art became a key point of discussion. We worked with an article entitled "Arts Still Not Attracting Large Audiences," that pointed out a direct link between socio-economic class and museum, gallery, and theater attendance (Freed, 2002). The article suggested that economic class is not what keeps working class people from "high art" consumption. Rather, *social* class determines whether people feel comfortable visiting certain cultural institutions. Taking up these issues, we asked students to create reflective pieces (stories, images, essays) that assessed how their own class backgrounds affected their experiences with the arts. One student, Marie, had a particularly strong reaction to the article and shared her first experiences in which she attended museums. Growing up in a remote rural community, Marie's first experience of museums was after she left home to attend a residential arts high school. As she navigated those early museum visits, she realized that her neighbors back home would likely never choose to walk into a museum. While they might be interested in natural history or art, the social conventions of class that structure museum attendance imposed barriers her neighbors would be uncomfortable crossing.

Based on these experiences, Marie chose to do her internship at the Bell Museum of Natural History. She wanted to make museum material accessible to the general public by bringing the knowledge and resources of the museum out into communities. Marie believed that bringing the museum into places where people could not help but encounter it would dramatically change the dynamics of interaction. As part of her internship, she organized a series of scientific cafés, interdisciplinary science movie nights, and other "get-the-museum-out" activities to make the museum more accessible to diverse audiences. Marie turned her discomfort with the structure of museums as institutions into a wide-ranging project of putting the museum in the streets, bars and movie theaters.

Engaging directly and then redefining the politics of artistic production, Marie brought the stories of natural history to people who would not or could not cross the invisible barriers in front of the museum's doors.

Who can claim America?

This question helped us to explore how artists claim a space for themselves in relation to current national climates. It brought the semester full circle as we asked students to consider their own position and power in *America*. As our class was held in the midst of a legislative session and in the year of a major election, we were particularly concerned and conveniently positioned to engage students in conversations about their roles as citizens and as artists. We considered different ways that individuals and groups engage in claiming the civic process through artistic media. Key resources in this section included Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1985), Wing Young Huie's *Lake Street USA* (2001), and a series from *Fence* magazine entitled "Reclaiming Rhetoric and What Artists Can Do Now" (Crumpacker, 2003). We also returned to the field for conversations with artists working at the margins of society (immigrants; teachers working in urban schools; staff of small, cutting edge, political arts organizations) to understand how they relate to and claim a place in *America*.

Asking "Who can claim America?" brought the program to the crux of the mission of City Arts. We asked students to take up the histories, theories, and tools they developed over the course of the semester and use them to actively claim a place in the diverse American landscape. In discussion around this question, students wrestled with feelings of apathy and powerlessness and met them with concrete, realistic strategies for change. During this period we attended Arts Advocacy Day, an annual lobbying event organized by Minnesota Citizens for the Arts. The goal of the event is to have art-friendly constituents talk with their representatives and ask them to support art/cultural funding bills coming up for vote. Our goal was to get students involved in the democratic process. We wanted them to share stories and insights from their own experiences of the social and cultural value of the arts with their legislators who are sometimes uninformed about the power that art can have on the individuals, organizations, and communities in their districts. This activity, while an overall success, was met with some challenging questions from our students. They also participated in a Homelessness Advocacy Day, asking their legislators to fund homelessness prevention programs, shelters, and other services necessary for the survival of thousands of Minnesotans. Students rightly asked why they should advocate for money for the arts when funding for shelters was being cut. The extreme juxtaposition of one cause against the other instigated a great deal of agony for the students. As teachers, we first had to help students understand the complexities of state revenue streams. By the time of the advocacy days, allocations had already been made to committees, and the committee that oversees arts funding in Minnesota does not oversee shelter and food shelf funding. In addition, the basic inequity of the situation—that some people were homeless while others were receiving arts grants—raised a powerful conversation about the danger of zero sum political thinking. Committed both to the arts and the end of homelessness, our students realized that pressure to choose one *over* the other represented a false choice. Returning to our focus on their privileges and responsibilities as artists in America, we worked with students to understand how the system functions now, and what they can do to change this structure.

James, an art major, came to City Arts as a typical student—drawn to the arts and to social justice, but unsure of how to bring them together. Artistically, James was interested in "the city" as landscape in a formalist sense and was a participant in the vibrant Twin Cities urban culture. He hoped through City Arts to develop strategies for integrating his passion for art with his commitment to social justice.

James interned at OVERexposure, a photography initiative that fosters art for social change using a collaborative model that brings students, artists, marginalized communities, nonprofit organizations, and higher education institutions together. During the semester, James worked on a variety of organizational and artistic projects. He participated in and coordinated a major exhibition documenting the experiences of immigrants in Minnesota. He aided in building an organizational foundation for OVERexposure, helping secure funding and connections for the emerging nonprofit.

Though James was sometimes frustrated by spending more time on administrative and gallery coordinating tasks than on his own artwork, his interaction with other artists and with the process of developing a new organization helped him build connections between his interest in the form of urban subjects and his political convictions. James saw the power of art to make visible the experiences of people often left invisible at the margins of society. Through his internship work, he built context and connection between the city as urban landscape and the city as a collection of individuals and communities. James

James saw the power of art to make visible the experiences of people often left invisible at the margins of society. Through his internship work, he built context and connection between the city as urban landscape and the city as a collection of individuals and communities.

brought this new understanding to bear on the City Arts classroom as we discussed how imagery could be used to serve a variety of ideological positions. Because of his internship, James shared concrete examples of how claiming the right to self-representation is a key strategy for marginalized groups seeking a place in *America*.

Conclusions

Working their way through the four framing questions highlighted in this article, City Arts students sought a grounded, empowering sense of what it means to be an artist in America and how their own work can function in the public sphere. Students sharpened their ability to think critically, analyze language and expression, and creatively re-imagine the world they would like to see. At its best, the program helped students integrate their senses of themselves as artists, members of diverse communities, students, and active players in the American democracy. We believe that students left the program better able to see themselves as multifaceted actors and more engaged in work for social change.

We measure the success of the semester in the work of students like Sarah, Marie, Michael, and James. We also measure the program's success in the level of insight offered in the self-reflective essay we ask each student to compose at the end of the term. These essays reveal students who have come to see their own potential as creative practitioners who work for social change. As one student explained, "At the beginning of the semester, I often asked myself 'Isn't a speech just as good?' 'Why waste time with a song, or a painting, why not just write an article?' and only now, reintroduced after being so far removed from art in a classroom setting, can I see that there is an immeasurable effect that art has on perception."

Students sharpened their ability to think critically, analyze language and expression, and creatively re-imagine the world they would like to see. At its best, the program helped students integrate their senses of themselves as artists, members of diverse communities, students, and active players in the American democracy.

Christa Olson is a Ph.D. candidate in Writing Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, and co-taught the City Arts program from 2001-2005. E-mail: cjolson2@uiuc.edu

William Reichard is a writer, educator, poet, and director of the City Arts program. He teaches at the Higher Education Consortium for Urban Affairs, St. Paul, Minnesota. E-mail: wreichard@hecua.org

REFERENCES

Anzaldua, G. (1999). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Blitzstein, M. (1938). *The cradle will rock*. New York: Random House.

Boal, A. (1985). *Theatre of the oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group.

Boyte, H., & Kari, N. (2000). Renewing the democratic spirit in American colleges and universities: Higher education as public work. In T. Ehrlich (Ed.), *Civic responsibility and higher education* (pp. 37-39). Washington, DC: American Council on Education and Oryx Press.

Brenson, M. (2001). *Visionaries and outcasts*. New York: The New Press.

Cheney, L. (1995). *Telling the truth*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Coulter, A. (2003). *Treason: Liberal treachery from the cold war to the war on terrorism*. New York: Crown Forum.

Crumpacker, C. (Ed.). (2003). Oldthinkers unbellyfeel newspeak: Reclaiming rhetoric and what artists can do now[s10]. *Fence*, 6(1), 79-91, 143-151.

de Tocqueville, A. (1990). *Democracy in America*. New York: Vintage Books.

Deveare Smith, A. (1994). *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*. New York: Anchor Books.

Dominguez, V. (2000). For a politics of love and rescue. *Cultural anthropology, 15*, pp. 361-393.

Doss, E. (2003). *Twentieth century American art*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Doty, M. (2000). Firebird. New York: Perennial.

D'Souza, D. (2002). *What's so great about America*. Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing.

Epstein, M. (Director). (2003). *Miller, Kazan, and the blacklist: None without sin* [Motion picture]. United States: American Masters / PBS.

Fence magazine (2003, Spring/Summer). Reclaiming rhetoric and what artists can do now[s11]. 6(1), pps. 79-91, 143-151.

Florida, R. (2002). *The rise of the creative class*. New York: Basic Books.

Freed, G. (2002, 17 November). Arts still not attracting large numbers of low-income patrons. Minneapolis, MN: *The Star Tribune*.

Gates, Jr., H. L. (1990). Whose canon is it anyway? In B. Wallis (Ed), *Democracy* (pp. 69-75). Seattle, WA: Bay Press.

Heffner, R. (Ed.) (1991). *A documentary history of the United States*. New York: Perennial Classics.

hooks, b. (1995). *Art on my mind*. New York: The New Press.

Huie, W. Y. (2001). *Lake Street USA*. St. Paul, MN: Ruminator Press.

Humphreys, D. (2000). Diversity, democracy, and civic engagement: Higher education and its unique opportunity. *Higher Education Exchange, 86*, 82-89.

Illich, I. (1990). To hell with good intentions. In J. Kendall (Ed.), *Combining service and learning: A resource book for community and public service* (pp. 314-320). Raleigh, NC: National Society for Internships and Experiential Education.

Library of Congress with contributions by Levering Lewis, D., & Willis, D. (2003). *A small nation of people: W.E.B. DuBois and African American portraits of progress*. New York: Amistad an imprint of Harper Collins.

Lippard, L. (2000). *Mixed blessings: New art in a multicultural America*. New York: The New Press.

Markusen, A., & King, D. (2003). *The artistic dividend: The arts' hidden contribution to regional development*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs.

Miller, A. (1995). *The crucible*. New York: Penguin Books.

Quiroga, J. (2001). *Tropics of desire*. New York: New York University Press.

Reagan, B. J. (1990). Foreword: Nurturing resistance. In M. O'Brian & C. Little (Eds.), *Reimaging America: The arts of social change* (pp. 1-8). Santa Cruz, CA: New Society.

Rich, A. (2001). *Arts of the possible*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co.

Rinder, L. (Ed.). (2003). *The American effect: Global perspectives on the United States 1990-2003*. New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc.

Rodriquez, R. (1983). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez*. New York: Bantam Books.

Sax, L. J. (2000). Citizenship development and the American college student. In T. Ehrlich (Ed.), *Civic responsibility and higher education* (pp. 3-18). Washington, DC: American Council on Education and Oryx Press.

Sontag, S. (2002). *Regarding the pain of others*. New York: Picador.

Trouillot, M-R. (1995). *Silencing the past*. New York: Beacon Books.

Truitt, A. (1984). *Daybook: The journal of an artist*. New York: Penguin.

Truitt, A. (1987). *Turn: The journal of an artist*. New York: Penguin.

Truitt, A. (1996). Prospect: *The journal of an artist*. New York: Scribner's.

Zinn, H. (2003). *A people's history of the United States*. New York: Perennial Classics. (Original work published 1980)

ENDNOTES

[1]Both liberal and conservative groups broadly rejected programs like "Terrorism Information and Prevention System (TIPS)" because it could be construed to promote citizens spying on each other.

[2]Students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.