Inner Work, Public Acts: The Conocimiento of Art

Ann Torke
University of Massachusetts Boston, ann.torke@umb.edu
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Abstract: Gloria Anzaldúa’s conocimiento feels familiar to me. I recognize myself in her words. Like coming home. I became an artist because I sought more. A job or interesting career wasn’t enough. To be an artist is a way of life, a filter interpreting life as you live it. Art is about paying attention, problem solving, language acquisition (visual literacy), and a disciplined approach—all aspects at the core of creativity. The artist shifts “to the inner exploration of the meaning and purpose in life” (Anzaldúa). So for me, Art is conocimiento, conocimiento is Art. While walking my dogs on the edge of a forest preserve in Geneva, Illinois (30 miles west of Chicago), one day, I stumbled upon a lone, neglected and unkempt cemetery enclosed by a ramshackle, padlocked cyclone fence. Scaling the fence, I found twenty-two, crude, unadorned gravestones inscribed with the names of young women who died between the ages of 14 and 21, from 1897-1930. Twenty-eight remaining tombstones have inscriptions of infants who died the same year they were born, between 1930-1970. The cemetery is a compelling symbolic statement for how women’s rights and quality of life historically have been diminished, controlled and often forgotten, especially if one didn’t fit into or fulfill the roles prescribed for women at the time.
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pects at the core of creativity. The artist
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ing and purpose in life.”¹ So for me, Art is
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Conocimiento comes from opening
all your senses, consciously inhab-
itating your body and decoding its
systems—that persistent scalp itch,
not caused by lice or dry skin, may
be thought trying to snare your at-
tention. …Breaking out of your
mental and emotional prison and
depenening the range of perception
enables you to link inner reflection
and vision—the mental, emotional,
instinctive, imaginal, spiritual, and
subtle bodily awareness—with so-
cial, political action and lived expe-
riences to generate subversive
knowledge. These conocimientos
challenge official and conventional
ways of looking at the world, ways
set up by those benefiting from
such constructions.²

II

During a recent class discussion, stu-
dents told me about a senior Art major in an
advanced studio course who exclaimed, “I
want to be a painter, so I don’t go to muse-
ums. This way, I’ll be original.” The idea of
the lone artist in his garret creating great
works of art is an outmoded modernist no-
tion. Cutting oneself off in order to really be
able to see, in order to move toward some-
thing more authentic, doesn’t function in
this day and age. Because learning, grow-
ing and acquiring conocimiento does not
occur in isolation. True engagement re-
quires integration and synthesis. It means
being open to the world around you.

As an artist and professor, my goal is to
develop and promote the inter-relatedness
of information, with the connection be-
 tween disciplines as the guiding principle.
While Western life is rife with examples of
the commodification of Art as the primary
determinant of value, my teaching strives
to develop a context for what motivates art-
ists to be connected, because artists are ac-
tive participants in cultural production.
Rather than working within a discipline as
distinct and separate from life, sanctioned
for a privileged audience within the walls
of a museum, contemporary art strives to
be connected, to acknowledge that the most
effective work is art that is engaged and en-
genders a dialogue about our lives, the in-
stitutions we move through, and the varied
cultures we live within.

The diversity committee’s charge to re-
view syllabi that incorporate diversity re-
veals an underlying assumption that effec-
tive teaching requires a student-centered,
progressive pedagogy using models that
frame education as relevant to the students’
lives. By doing so, teaching becomes a sub-
versive act—dismantling the notion that
the only valid knowledge is discrete, dis-
connected and objective. For my classes
and for producing Art, subjectively is an es-
sential component in the creative process,
especially when it is used as a tool to devel-
lop critical reflexivity. Anzaldúa shows that
by focusing on personal experience, we
open ourselves up to greater understand-
ing through experiencing the world in
more synthesized dimensions.

¹ Anzaldúa, Gloria & Analouise Keating Ed.
This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for
² Ibid., p. 542.

...Your desire for order prompts
you to track the ongoing circum-

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stances in your life, to sift, sort and symbolize your experiences and try to arrange them into a pattern and story that speak to your reality. You scan your inner landscape, books, movies, philosophies, mythologies, and the modern science for bits of lore you can patch together to create a new narrative articulating your personal reality. You scrutinize and question dominant and ethnic ideologies and the mind-set their cultures induce in others. And putting all the pieces together, reenvision the map of the known world, creating a new description of reality and scripting a new story.  

III

While walking my dogs on the edge of a forest preserve in Geneva, Illinois (30 miles west of Chicago), I stumbled upon a lone, neglected and unkempt cemetery enclosed by a ramshackle, padlocked cyclone fence. Scaling the fence, I found twenty-two, crude, unadorned gravestones inscribed with the names of young women who died between the ages of 14 and 21, from 1897-1930. Twenty-eight remaining tombstones have inscriptions of infants who died the same year they were born, between 1930-1970.

The girls and infants were from the Illinois State Industrial School for Delinquent Girls, which operated from 1895-1977. The facility institutionalized “wayward” girls who were orphans or runaways, or were judged as incorrigible, sexually promiscuous, without family or having family problems or neglected. But to be “wayward” was an effect of a patriarchal value system that expected girls to assume and conform to specific gender roles; even the name of the school reflects this. Any attempt to break out of these constraints would be considered transgressive. Within this framework, to be unwed and pregnant or a lesbian would be the worst predicaments possible.

Investigating the cemetery became an art project for me. It culminates in an installation entitled “The Outlot.” The residue left behind over time pulled me in: that is the manifestation of presence/absence exemplified at the site. This piece is about displacement, the displacement that has occurred physically at the site itself as well as in the lives of the women—underscoring how the refusal to accept prescribed, subservient roles worked to displace them. The cemetery is a compelling symbolic statement for how women’s rights and quality of life historically have been diminished, controlled and often forgotten, especially if one didn’t fit into or fulfill the roles prescribed for women at the time. “…The residents were called Geneva’s bad girls and the school was not mentioned in the city’s history book published in 1977.” I can’t help identifying with the girls; as an artist, academic, and independent lesbian growing up less than 100 miles from the school, the discovery of the cemetery has a resonance for me that was deep and chilling.

After the school was closed in 1977, the property, including more than 20 buildings, was purchased and maintained by Waste Management, the area’s disposal company. They demolished the buildings and used a portion of the 50 acres for landfill. Much of the remaining contents of the school, including institutional enamelware, farm equipment, and toilets were cast over the hill adjacent to the cemetery, cascading down into the ravine. I culled through and collected some of these artifacts including enamel ware (pitchers, bowls, trays), and

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3 Ibid., p. 545.

5 Ibid.
bottles, which have been incorporated into the installation.

During Waste Management’s tenure, there were several cases of vandalism reported. “On a visit to the cemetery, reporters and a photographer observed at least five graves dug up. Some of the diggings are not deep. What appears to be the most obvious case of plundering is a large gaping hole near the tombstone of an 18 year-old.” The official document compiled by the Geneva Historical Society in 1999 lists the name of one girl whose tombstone no longer exists in the cemetery, as well as omits the name of another tombstone that I documented a year earlier that has also disappeared. Another tombstone has no inscription at all, presumably worn off over time. These examples compound the way in which history continues to erode over the years.

The erasure culminates in the early 1990’s, when the property was sold to John Henry Homes, Inc., residential developers who planned to construct luxury homes. In the developer’s brochure, the cemetery is labeled an “outlot,” a term that serves as a powerful metaphor for the expendability of these young women and their children. The old cyclone fence has been replaced by a tall iron enclosure without any entrance (there is a padlocked gate on the side) or identification and surrounded on all sides by newly planted shrubbery and trees intended to obscure what is inside. The homes, Selling for upwards of $600,000, now populate the area. A legacy of neglect and disavowal are evident in the site by how careless and disrespectful the successive caretakers have treated the girls’ remains. In effect, the cemetery is a monument to disregard. Illinois law mandates that it is illegal to remove or desecrate cemeteries. Sometimes I wonder if this is the only reason that the cemetery remains.

“The Outlot” is displayed as an installation, comprised of tombstone rubbings, debris collected from the ravine, a map from the development company labeling the cemetery as an “outlot” and a video loop projection in order to memorialize the women who have been marginalized by the customs and conventions they inherit. Anzaldúa has reminded me how this project “revisions” history and “scripts a new story.” It is my subversive response, an attempt to integrate the past and a refusal to allow these patterns to continue. The installation functions as an act of rebellion and a form of reclamation.

Minnie Pringle Ford tombstone rubbing
Brochure with “Outlot” Label
Mamie Ashby tombstone. Her name is not on the historical society’s official list of 22 girls and 28 infants