Finding Voice

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The basis of this inquiry is how the visual arts contribute to positive social change. *Finding Voice* represents the notion that the visual arts are an expression of the aspirations of people in their hope for a more just and democratic society. It emphasizes the power and potential of collective voice in the visual portrayal of historical injustice and the envisioning of a new paradigm in which to move forward. This book, then, values the notion of voice as key to agency and the responsibility to act.

The specific focus of this book, in post-apartheid South Africa, necessitates a multidisciplinary approach straddling the fields of arts education and developmental studies and requires examination of the sociological, political, historical, and cultural aspects of society. As there is no comfortable disciplinary home for such an investigation, this book crosses disciplinary boundaries, drawing on diverse concepts and understandings in order to enable the creation of a space that is able to explore, invent, imagine, or reject certain traditional notions. These concepts are akin to the practice of art-making, in that they can question the “givens” and imagine new possibilities. In this way, art, or visual voice, can be a pathway to navigate transformative ways of becoming.

The following questions animate my inquiry:

1. How can creative strategies respond to imperatives for democratic change?
2. How can collectives organized around creative activity effectively respond to social trauma?
3. To what extent do current government institutions impede or facilitate art and culture in fulfilling potentially transformative social roles?

Answering these questions involves innovations in design, methodology, implementation, and evaluation. *Finding Voice* values co-creation, community participation, and citizen action. In this exploration, I feature the visual arts as a mode of knowledge that requires keeping ourselves reflexively open to diversity and to the unexpected, in order to discern those elements that do not fit into our theories or dominant codes. This book proposes a primary role for activists who move beyond traditional theories of social justice to advocate new frameworks that are responsive to current social and political needs, through learning from the history of social activism through the arts and then building on those approaches. As activists and facilitators, we explore contexts or conditions that facilitate the emergence and maintenance of new possibilities of meaning and action. Voices and stories from the field provide a bottom-up approach to unlocking some of those theories and contribute to making a compelling case for the role of visual arts in creating social change.

To create a climate for creativity and innovation, it is necessary to develop an approach to creating social change that acknowledges conventional approaches but is unafraid to displace them when their limitations hinder the creation of a climate for creativity and innovation. While many scholars, intellectuals, and activists have reframed knowledge and pedagogical innovation away from the Cartesian model of the certainty of scientific knowing, too many institutions still cling to traditional pedagogical styles and institutional structures. Not infrequently, these structures cause resistance to new technologies and to community engagement, discouraging broader access to changed ideologies of learning. South African scholars can play an important leadership role in showing how innovative approaches can foster a fertile environment for redress and agency for previously disadvantaged students.

At the heart of these approaches are stories. Arguably, all stories reveal collected experiences and become blueprints for deeper, more transformative practice. As experiences are shared, analyzed, and celebrated, social spaces become available to the narrators and listeners, thereby generating a fertile environment. These stories are particularly important in contemporary South Africa, where conservative influences have led some institutions to close doors on participatory and collective practice. It is imperative to find, create, and document methodologies—for intervention, analysis, and critique—that will strengthen multidimensional and interdisciplinary practice and theory in the domains of development and arts education. The stories contained in
this book have the potential to anchor socially transformative practices that expand capacities for effective work in development and arts education.

Chapter 1 examines a number of existing research methodologies, considering their strengths and weaknesses in respect to potential application in the field of the visual arts and social justice. Chapters 2 through 5 offer different methodological approaches to the use of the visual arts as transformational practice. This task is undertaken through the telling of distinct stories of projects, with chapter 5 exploring some new ideas about the use of the arts to assess social change. Each narrative constitutes differing responses to the South African government’s imperatives for the social and economic transformative ideals of nonracialism and the equality of rights and opportunities. The core challenges identified include building an arts organization, addressing the HIV and AIDS pandemic, engaging government policies, community engagement in higher education, and the challenges of evaluating change.

Chapter 2 tells the story of Artist Proof Studio (APS), a Johannesburg-based community arts organization that has implemented a new model of developing the potential of excellence though printmaking for emerging artists who otherwise would not have access to higher education. Linked to the story of APS are gender advocacy programs and the Paper Prayers project, which employs arts and crafts processes to embed a deeper awareness and choices for action in response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Chapter 3 tells the story of Phumani Paper, a national initiative in handmade paper that raises questions surrounding the South African government’s policies on poverty alleviation and job creation through the establishment of multiple craft enterprises across South Africa.

Chapter 4 shifts the book’s focus to the relationship between academic institutions and participatory community engagement programs as a site for promoting active citizenship among university students. First, the chapter engages the role of academics and students in a South African university undergoing transformation. Second, it positions the arts and the role of artists as catalyzers of transformation in the academy.

Chapter 5 provides a case study that focuses on the challenges of assessing individual and social change though participatory and arts-based methodologies. A series of research and project interventions in a four-year program called Cultural Action for Change considers the individual and collective participants and student researcher responses to the HIV and AIDS pandemic and other public health challenges. The interventions further seek to evaluate increased economic and social participation of the community groups.

The projects considered in this study present different social challenges
involving different sectors of community, arts, higher education, and South African urban and rural poverty nodes. These projects require different approaches: research and visual arts training, economic strategies and skills transfer in craft development, and visual arts strategies. The personal stories arising from the projects reveal the development of voice, highlighting how the visual arts can deepen the democratic process among individuals and communities in South Africa. These stories, together with the grassroots experiences of participants, show evidence of significant transformative change. They offer a wealth of insight and information for scholars researching new theories, frameworks, and approaches.

My goal in relating these stories is to identify and examine strategies for change that challenge and reinterpret current concepts of economic development and poverty alleviation. This work yields new methods that can be used to implement and assess complex, sustainable projects in community development. In terms familiar from ecosystem analysis, sustainability and renewal are reliant on values of interdependence, partnerships, flexibility, diversity, and complex networks. Flexible approaches to methodology and theories of change are imperative in understanding the examples and in developing future work.

Through this study, I also seek to fill a gap in the field of cultural activism by sharing lessons and findings that assist in building research and policy and increase the possibility of meaningful change. A dynamic role for collective participatory approaches needs to be strengthened to allow successful practices of project evaluation and arts education. I propose that the development of individual agency is supported by the capacities of voice, resilience, dreaming, and imagination and that engaging the creative process activates the process of individual and social change. These themes prevail through each of the case studies in this book.

As this work is centered on agency, it values practice that percolates up rather than uses theory as a starting point. Theory is generated from practice through reflection and integration in a multidirectional exchange. Core premises are that an experiential approach feeds theory and that practice leads to understanding. In this way, new knowledge is created. Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is a foundational text for a model of teaching and learning that begins with the existing knowledge of the learners and considers learning to be collaborative rather than force-fed. As Freire’s writings make clear, there often tends to be a radical disjunction between academia and the community at large. Mark Taylor, writing about the complexity of emerging network culture in his book *The Moment of Complexity* (2001), has recognized the importance of bridging the divide between theory and practice.
Theory without practice is empty; practice without theory is blind. The ongoing challenge is to bring theory and practice together in such a way that we can theorize our practices and practice our theories. \(^1\)

Perhaps, as the critic Lucy Lippard suggests, it is useful and most accessible to think of ideas rather than theories, which tend to lock “ideas up into boxes to which not all of us have the key.” She has argued convincingly that the most valuable theories evolve organically, from practice. \(^2\) Through the stories and case studies presented in *Finding Voice*, I seek to show this organic evolution.

Marshall Ganz, a longtime activist and the author of *Why Stories Matter* (2009), suggests that when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public account of who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to go. He cites the first-century Jerusalem sage Rabbi Hillel, who asked three questions that are at the root of leadership and organizing:

If I am not for myself, who am I?
When I am only for myself, what am I?
And if not now, when? \(^3\)

Ganz calls the response to the first question a “story of self,” for relating “why I have been called.” The story you tell of why you sought to lead provides insight into your values and lets others know what they can expect and potentially learn from you. The “story of self” presented in *Finding Voice* is complex. My role as founder of Artist Proof Studio and Phumani Paper includes roles of insider/outside, teacher/learner, leader/collaborator, and critic/facilitator. These complex positions move through each story told in this book and often get merged with what comprises, in Ganz’s terms, the “story of us.”

Ganz talks about the “story of us” as an answer to why we are called: “What experiences and values do we share as a community? What our community organization has been called to do? What are its shared purposes, goals and vision?” *Finding Voice* presents a “story of us” that is made up of complex relational webs of students, colleagues, artists, organizations, funders, collaborators, and partners. As organizations and collaborators intersect and learn from each other, the belief in the catalytic role of personal agency fuses the “self” with “us,” and visions and aspirations that might be identified as “mine” or “ours” often cannot be distinguished as separate.

Finally, Ganz refers to the “story of now,” which he calls “the fierce urgency of now”: “How do we appreciate the challenges and the conflicts between the values we wish for our world and can aspire to, and the values that actually exist? How do we seize an opportunity and turn it into action?” \(^4\)
In *Finding Voice*, the “urgency of now” changes throughout the narratives of over two decades of democracy in South Africa, starting with the urgency of redress and reconciliation in the founding of Artist Proof Studio, followed by the development of the Paper Prayers campaign in response to the urgency of the HIV and AIDS pandemic and the establishment of Phumani Paper to address the urgency of poverty and job creation to the current education crisis. Twenty-six years after the founding of APS, the “fierce urgency of now” in South Africa involves the urgency for activism around the university students’ protests for free education, which dominated the South African political spectrum from the end of 2015, and the initiative of decolonizing the universities.

Being an artist is a key part of my own identity. For me, making an artwork has a physical and emotional impetus that permits me to find a visual and metaphoric voice. I see the creative process as driven by a need to translate a personal and visceral response to my life experience into a mediated expression of a public communication. I chose to be a printmaker and to teach printmaking because of its accessibility. I believe that printmaking is the most democratic of artistic media. I am intoxicated by the notion of transformation—that space for radical change, creative reinvention, the arena of possibilities. While, in some ways, my artistic voice is quieter than my activist/educator voice, it is nevertheless an essence that feeds my energy, restores my sense of self, reconciles my spirit and my practice, helps me achieve balance, and gives me the fortitude to be resilient. In addition to my identity as an artist, my various roles in the stories that follow span my experience as an activist, student, teacher, founding director, researcher, connector, and communicator among and between project sites and organizations. Situated among these multiple positions, the concept of “self” becomes fluid, multiple, mediating, adaptable, and even fraught. Central to my understanding of self is a commitment to a democratic, co-creative, co-learning practice. However, while I explore these notions in reciprocal relationships, they are often complicated by the power imbalance that accompanies the issues of my whiteness and privilege. The legacies of the abuse of power, exploitation, racism, and discrimination often disrupt the positive discourses of dreaming, imagining, and believing as a way of navigating hope and agency.

Making art is a physical process of imaging and shaping possibility. It can be seen as a kind of working, as well as acting and projecting the change you want to see. Projective agency also entails interactions with its contexts, and like conversations, these interactions are not always positive but can involve skepticism, fears, dilemmas, and the ambiguities of evolving situations.
To return to the challenge, posed by Ganz (2009), that requires us to “seize this hope, and turn it into concrete action”—at present, the key questions with which South African educators are grappling have to do with the complexities of transforming higher education in an African, rather than colonial, academic context. Ahmed Bawa asks, “When will universities in South Africa become South African Universities?” He implies that this has to do with a lack of shift away from a Eurocentric intellectual culture. Such questions raise exceptionally interesting challenges for higher education with regard to its “democratic responsibilities,” and I posit that arts-based approaches to research and social engagement have much to offer to the discourse and practice of decolonization.

A common organizing principle of differentiating an African approach to social justice and the ideal of relating in a communal way is embodied in the southern African Nguni word for human virtue, *ubuntu*. At its simplest, *ubuntu* means “humanness,” the notion of an individual’s well-being as intertwined with that of others. This ethic prescribes becoming a “real” person through sharing a way of life with other persons and caring for their quality of life. *Ubuntu* requires a fundamental move away from considering solely one’s own self-interest, to situating oneself in the interests of the broader community. *Ubuntu* calls on us to be participatory and inclusive as a fundamental aspect of being human, evoking imagination to create alternative visions in collaboration with others.

The student uprising in South Africa demonstrates the power of active citizenship in its call for fairness and equity in access to higher education. But much of it has turned violent and destructive. A chilling statement included in the campaign, “Burn to be heard,” seems to evidence, as one journalist stated, “our default language in South Africa and a throwback to our past.” There is an urgent need to find creative solutions to problem solving when engaging and negotiating difference.

The arts can serve as a way to examine injustice and to allow creativity and vision to inform the construction of new personal, organizational, and communal relationships. *Finding Voice* explores ways that the visual arts engage social change through imagination, play, innovation, and skills. These engagements, in turn, provide the space to conceive of new ways of seeing. Finding a common voice in co-creation has been and still is a means of shaping a transformed and democratic South Africa.