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VOICES IN CONTEMPORARY ART

A CONVERSATION WITH LIGORANOREESE

By Marisa Lerer

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This week's contributing author, Marisa Lerer, is an associate professor of art history at Manhattan College. She is co-editor of Public Art Dialogue and specializes in Latin American and Latinx art, public art, and memorials. She is presently preparing a book manuscript on Latinx Public Memorials.

During the Summer of 2020, LigoranoReese, the collaboration of Nora Ligorano and Marshall Reese, created The School of Good Citizenship in Charlotte, North Carolina. The School brought together a multi-faceted group of artists, performers, and activists to address some of the most pressing issues of our time including voting rights, racial and environmental justice, and immigration. In an email correspondence in January 2021, LigoranoReese shared the origins of their latest project and their creative approaches to collaboration and activism.

The School of Good Citizenship is related to previous public art interventions that you've created at National Democratic and Republican Conventions. Could you discuss the origins of The School of Good Citizenship and the interaction of art and activism that the project fosters?

Our previous public art interventions have focused on performative and durational projects that rely on public involvements such as Crater NY (2007) and Crater Bay Area (2008), which highlighted issues of gentrification. At National Conventions, we centered our temporary monuments, or ice sculptures in the project series Melted Away.



The seeds for The School of Good Citizenship were planted in Washington in September 2018 during the Kavanaugh hearings with Truth Be Told, where we installed the word “Truth” as an ice sculpture on the National Mall. Seeing the word disappear in front of the capitol was portentous. We debuted the sculpture on the National Mall as the central focus for two days of events: a poetry reading at Busboys and Poets and a panel organized with PEN America and the Corcoran School on the effects of fake news on journalism.

In the fall of 2018, we knew that the next project needed to be in Charlotte, as the Republican Convention was slated to be there. We had already loved working in the city since we did Morning In America there in 2012. This time we were especially committed to opening up the process to other artists, also to activist organizations because North Carolina is at the forefront to expand voting rights. We had been following the efforts of the Poor Peoples’ Campaign and the Moral Monday Movement. We see The School of Good Citizenship as a significant way to invite participation from artists and communities, our way to give back, as it were, by offering opportunities for artists and communities to get involved; to create possibilities for them to show their work and connect with one another through social action.

How did the pandemic impact your creative processes and the execution of your project?

The pandemic forced us to rethink ways to engage the public and community. The first reaction was paralysis. How can you make public art work when you can no

longer convene in public? Jonell Logan, our project manager, an independent curator in Charlotte, said early on, “Think of this as an opportunity, not a problem.” It was a brilliant suggestion and really helpful to reframe the project. Our primary focus was how to adapt an experience like the temporary monuments online with the sense of duration and evolution through time. In the beginning of the pandemic, we had participated in a number of online music and art experiences including the Pauline Oliveros Sonic Meditation organized by the International Contemporary Ensemble and Pablo Helguera’s singing telegram, which made big impressions on us.

Our first idea was bringing people together to uplift Charlotte in song. Reaching out to choral groups and connecting with faith-based communities was an exciting possibility, because churches are instrumental in civil rights and voting. Jonell connected us with David Tang, a choral director involved with virtual choirs. With David we organized three virtual choir concerts each part sung and pre-recorded by the singers on their mobile devices which we edited and mixed together.

Independent curator Amanda McDonald Crowley, who worked on the project as studio manager, suggested that spoken word poets might open up the conversation even more broadly. We invited artist and community organizer Bluz as MC to join us live for four nights of streamed half-hour programs while the RNC was happening. We called the series I Once Was Lost But Now Am Found, alluding to the hymn “Amazing Grace.”

In addition, The Light Factory was the first of our partners to move their photo and language workshops online. The Levine Museum installed the group exhibition on voting rights *Counting Up: What’s On Your Ballot?* in their galleries and displayed it as a virtual exhibition online.

Your work is collaborative in nature. What have you learned in the process of expanding that collaboration through partnerships with individuals and organizations that range from choral directors to the Latin American Coalition and the League of Women Voters?

Partnerships and collaboration are essential requirements for this kind of project. Communication is supremely important. As artists constantly collaborating, we share shorthand and codes between us, which may not translate beyond our dyad. One of the big lessons from The School is the importance of an advisory board. Connecting with cultural leaders as advisors and listening to their wisdom aided us in meeting other artists, curators, and activists, as well as helped us identify cultural, educational, and community organizations to work and partner with. With all of the lead artists, filmmakers, exhibiting artists, choirs, cultural organizers, advisors ... we ended up working with about 240 people. It was nerve wracking, but also exhilarating.

What is the next chapter for the School of Good Citizenship and how do you imagine the School's future in a post-pandemic world?

What we experienced is that it's really important to create opportunities for other artists to talk about social issues and the issues that are important for their communities. If you want to create a broad social network, as we do, it's important to go outside the art circle and connect with social service organizations to advance, bring awareness to the climate crisis, the economic crisis, the end of the American Dream.

Our next step is to bring what we've learned in large public art events to other cities and communities, particularly those in the states affected by the Voting Rights Act. Art is creative action and so is voting, we need to make this connection. Voter suppression is not going away. Right now, state governments are criminalizing not only the right to vote but the way we do it. Especially in the 2020 election. The urgency is clear, we need to rally and boost practical actions, like casting a vote, to offset the forces seeking to limit the voice of the voter and destroy our democracy.

<https://voca.network/blog/2021/03/26/a-conversation-with-ligoranoreese/>