

Through Lines and Transitions

by Cynthia Weiss

The Way It Is

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost...
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

William Stafford

Through-Lines: Reeling in the Good Stuff from Studio Practice to Program Design

Like actors who create imaginative mental narratives to inform their portrayal of a character on stage, each of us creates personal *through lines* that give meaning to our multiple identities in the world. Teaching artists, in the complexity of our work, are called upon to play constantly shifting roles- from artist, organizer, facilitator, educator, entrepreneur and administrator. Each of these tasks demands different skills sets, textures, and qualities of being. What will serve us best to create coherent narratives in our own lives?

As a public artist, painter, educator and program director, I like to think that the through line of my work is that of a designer. I design murals, professional development workshops, opportunities for dialogue, and programs. I am usually excited about the challenge that this complexity brings; I enjoy the creative connections between work of group facilitation, curriculum design, coaching and teaching. But, I struggle with the deep disconnect I often feel between other tasks of administrative work; writing grants, making budgets, running meetings, strategic planning, and the open-ended creative process of I use for designing public artwork or discovering the shape of a painting.

It seems at times like these tasks are worlds apart. But, do they need to be? What would happen if we worked to bring the vibrant and creative processes from our studios and rehearsal rooms to the planning meetings, national conferences, teacher institutes and classrooms? How can we better activate the work that makes us feel most alive into work that has historically been more rote and prescriptive? What if the metaphors that informed our art making came to also shape our daily teaching and administrative

practice? What if we changed the norms of expected behavior within our offices, conferences, training programs to reel in the energy and power of art-making?

Gifts of Form and Structures

The artistic process offers us the gifts of form, structures, experimentation, invention and discovery. We often leave these gifts at the door as we enter into our day jobs. I would like to propose that we should make it a practice to bring these forms and structures to all parts of our lives. *There is a thread that you follow*, writes poet, William Stafford, and following this thread allows us to bring our full humanity to all our endeavors.

One place to start is to name and identify the structures that we hold dear in the creation of our artwork. I am particularly interested in the signature processes we each have developed from practice and revision, trial and error, in our studios and classrooms. The Teachers and Writers Collaborative calls these signature processes, Old Faithfuls, the tried and true writing assignments that writers have found to serve them again and again with their students. I have watched Project AIM teaching artists in the classroom share model lessons with their students, they have already scaffolding the learning and bring their students into engaging structures that will allow them to think about their tasks in different ways. The Project AIM artist cadre has spent time-sharing some of their old faithful, best processes with each other adapting and borrowing from each other's repertoire.

Drawing Lines and Making Meaning

One of my *old faithfuls* is a mural design process that I learned from veteran muralist, Caryl Yasko, while I was a student in her public art class at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Caryl walked into our class on the first day wearing paint-spattered overalls, well-worn work boots and an enormous circle of keys at her waist that seemed to promise opening doors to the whole city. In so many ways, Caryl did just that for me. She introduced me to the work of the Chicago Mural Group (now the Chicago Public Art Group); gave me a chance to volunteer on a large-scale mural project, and invited me into the world of public art that has been a core passion of mine to this day. She also taught me a very valuable design process that I have used ever since.

Designing for murals in Chicago poses particular problems. Walls are often run the length of a building that can extend over 100 feet. These long, horizontal canvases demand a design that can carry the eye across the whole expanse of the wall, holding the interest of the viewer who may be in a passing car, bus or train, or viewing the work up close, section by section. Caryl taught us to begin our designs with large flowing movement lines that would set up a pattern and rhythm for the work. We began quite literally with making charcoal lines across a scale drawing, playing with thick and thin lines, curving, graceful looping, overlapping diagonals, interrupted grids, zigzags and spirals. The overlapping lines created shapes and spaces for us to then begin to add details and images relevant to the mural theme.

I now begin all my own mural designs, and many of my studio paintings, and teacher professional development workshops with the drawing of lines. After the lines are drawn, I will work with my collaborators to research images, work from photographs, collect ideas drawn for community participants for the purpose of communicating a story for the mural. When we have a theme in mind, we return to our line drawings to see how the shapes might be transformed into a narrative of connected images.

The Shape of Community Participation

This past year I worked as a design consultant with two CPAG artists, Todd and Tracy, for an extraordinary public art project in my Edgewater neighborhood in Chicago. The lead artists, Tracy Vanduinen and Todd Osbrne invited me to assist with the design, and later with the fabrication of a 2,000 sq. ft. mosaic project in the underpass beneath Lake Shore Drive at Bryn Mawr. This bricolage project was the second of two projects at this site, on the south side of the underpass that had in depth community involvement in each step of the process. Edgewater residents of all ages, races and length of time living in the community brought design ideas, created ceramic objects for the wall and brought family photographs as contributions to the project. The Edgewater Historical Museum lent historic photographs of buildings and people that had helped to shape this community. The large unifying theme of the project was “growing-the growth and development of a diverse community working to create an inclusive vision for the future. Tracy, Todd and used the design process I had learned many years ago to create movement lines that connected the 200 ft long wall. We then added the elements of narrative; a resident planting flowers, a new moon, a catalpa tree, the transformation of a butterfly from cocoon to caterpillar to butterfly, the individual contributions of ideas within the larger rhythmic flow of the design.

This past summer, after a very dense year of programming, I took a month off to work in the Edgewater projects. I had the luxury of spending a few weeks at the wall site, working directly with Todd and Tracy and 30 teenagers from Alternatives Youth Network on constructing the mosaic mural. I had the chance to work break tile, apply it directly onto the wall, paint large-scale portraits and landscapes within the mural design, apply colored grout with sponges over the surface of the tile and then spend the time carefully cleaning the tile surfaces without pulling out the grout between the tiles. The scale and scope of the project left room for all the participants to work on scaffolding or on the ground laboring at the same time on this massive undertaking. Some of the absolutely best moments were meeting with Todd and Tracy and Kara at the wall site sitting across the street from the project and making revision and plans for attacking the days work. We needed to decide color schemes for the grout, or find references for the painted section. The pleasure of immediate revision and decisions is one of my greatest pleasures in the world.

We have been blessed with the most extraordinary weather this summer, so out of the ordinary for Chicago. This summer has been a summer of clear blue skies, low humidity

and temperate days and evening. On a particularly lovely day at the end of the project, I was painting a section of the mural and was in a true state of flow. The students were all in good moods, singing, flirting with each other. We were all in a state of flow. There had been a constant stream of cars exiting lake shore drive who drove past the mosaic, honking and giving us a thumbs up and a huge shout out of appreciation. “Nice job” was a constant refrain from everyone who passed by. As I worked in this system of young people and pitch-perfect lead artists, I felt such a sense of belonging to something much larger than myself.

Our Lines in Harmony with others

It came to me that this project was a bit like working on a modern-day cathedral, a project that never could be carried out by a single artist-it took all the artisan hands of the students and community volunteers and a years’ worth of ceramic contributions and financial contributions and patrons from the city of Chicago, to local small businesses to individuals contributions. It was such a deep pleasure to feel myself a part of something so much larger than myself, but at the same time to really see the immediate fruits of our labors revealed on the wall in front of us. Like a cathedral, we were leaving behind something permanent. Creating a sense of place that captured the imagination of the possible from an otherwise ordinary space. This realization of my small, but deeply rewarding part in a larger whole contributed greatly to my sense of flow.

And the blueprint, the drawing structure underneath the mosaic serve to connect all the individual pieces of tile in an interlocking, interdependent composition.

The great benefit of a permanent public art piece is that when the process is over, there is a testimony to the process and the transformation of a space into a public place.

Lines of Thought: Inviting Teachers and Artists into the Drawing Process

But one of the most parallel moments to the mural art making does happen when we get to facilitate teachers and students in the act of art-making. I had the good fortune to teach a group of teachers the design process in a whole school workshop. I returned to work and helped to lead a PD where I could teach my design process to teachers. The individual lines of that each teacher made layered patterns on top of each other. I taught them to find images in these lines that related to our chosen theme. Together they created a beautiful interlocking set of images on the theme of human nature. This mural design workshop was part of a larger workshop on how individuals can contribute to the state of common good. The through-line was direct and the form and process modeled the ideas of the workshop structured around collaborative interactions.

Aligning Artful Administration to processes that open up possibilities

When working in the administration of a program, it is often hard to have such a really tangible evidence of the impact of our work. It is hard to keep a perspective of what is being built in doing the necessary, but decidedly less engaging work of administrating a

program. Return to my office after a month of working on a scaffold in the most public of venues was a rough and demoralizing re-entry. It was easy to lose the thread of my summer artist-self.

So, where are the parallels between administration, teaching and artmaking? I am hoping that I am not stretching the point, but the line drawing process looks to connect, layer, build, overlap, obscure individual lines for so that there emerges a new dynamic and cohesive whole. The best programs follow the pattern of this exercise. They build on the experiences, ideas, contributions of the staff and participants, the layering of experiences-trial and error, constructed with the forms of the program and the content of our hopes and dreams. How do we find the right structures to support our values and goals? What do these patterns look like? What systems of interconnected workings do we plan, try out, erase, redraw, refine, so that our programs represent the ideas, values, messages we want to bring to our students, teachers and schools? To do the work of building a program in the style that has the deepest resonance for us as artists, is to ask these questions. What are the equivalent exercises in designing a program, conducting a strategic planning process that feels like artmaking?

On an aesthetic design level, the blueprint, the drawing structure underneath the mosaic serve to connect all the individual pieces of tile in an interlocking, interdependent composition. But, on a structural and interpersonal level, the success of the Bryn Mawr project depended on the leadership of the artists and the organizations that shepherded through the work. Tracy and Todd were generous, patient and inclusive leaders who invited community participation, and consultant support into the process, The Chicago Public Art Group and the leadership of Jon Pounds and Brenda Vega provided organizational support.

We cannot underestimate this other personal throughlines of personality and integrity and commitment. Eric Booth, founder of the Teaching Artist Journal and arts education consultant extraordinaire, says that 80% of what we teach is who we are. And who we are as teaching artists includes the gifts of being an artist. I might argue that the true percentage is even larger.

So, ultimately the throughline of our work in this field is who we are, all of who we are, Our philosophy, education, experiences, cultural backgrounds, spirituality, humor. I will argue

Through Lines and Time Lines: Making Generational Connections

The through-lines are rhythm, surprise, humor, changing it up, reasserting our values, looking closely at our students' work, working with new materials, younger artists, the expression for me is the need to spend a lot of time looking at the content of our work, spending time in revising curriculum, inviting the students into our process, making something larger than any individual can make on their own. Thinking in terms of scale

and size and force. Thinking in terms of building cathedrals within the school walls-making space for the remarkable within the ordinary.

Sustainability calls for the opportunity to take risks, reexamine premises, find fertile and welcoming soil for ideas to take root. What is the thread we are following? The thread is who we are and how we want to live in the world.

What is the throughline?

How is the drawing process really like the administrative process?

What is a sketch in administration?

Where is the play, experiments and willingness to take risks?

Where is the poetry?

What is the what if?

What are the values in abstract design? In formal properties?

How do we lay down a ground work ?

Are the conversations in the world café like the line work?

How does building a program impact the artmaking?

What does leadership as an artmaker look like?

The relationships of people are like the relationships of ideas. The images can reflect and bounce off of each other. The contours of an idea take shape. The lines map an improbability.

The lifeline the what could be the laying down of the possible.
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