# Making politics: engaged social tactics.

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# 10. Making Politics: Engaged Social Tactics, A conversation between Joseph DeLappe and Laura Leuzzi

In May 2021 Laura Leuzzi met with Joseph DeLappe to conduct the following interview for *Art as Social Practice: Technologies for Change.*

**Laura Leuzzi (LL):** Could you talk a bit about your background and education? You were not always engaged in the work you do now, focused on collaboration, politics and community-based engagements.

**Joseph DeLappe (JD):** Yes, well that was a bit of a journey through art school in the '80s. I started out studying graphic design for commercial advertising. Honestly, I was really turned off by that quite soon after getting into it—particularly after being awakened politically during this time frame, the Reagan era, attending hardcore punk rock shows in San Francisco, like the Dead Kennedy's, that kind of thing. Ethically, I couldn't stomach going into advertising and all that this would represent. Midway through my undergraduate studies, I found myself much more engaged in my fine arts coursework. I finished my design degree and then was accepted to graduate studies through the CADRE Institute at San Jose State University.

It should be noted that my studies in art school were very much focused around the modernist model of the "solo creative genius." With some exceptions, there was very little, if any, focus on collaboration, community, and seeking any kind of connection with the world outside of one's studio.

From this individually-focused art school I then went into an equally, if not more so, individually-focused academic career. After completing my MFA in 1990 I was fortunate to be hired in a tenure-track teaching position. This was in a high pressure, fairly cutthroat academic environment that was just horrible: It was seven years going through a brutal process of earning tenure in a department that was at war with itself. In the midst of this I was trying to develop my career with limited success attempting to play that game of self-promotion. I regularly sent out slide packets to galleries in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and entered competitions while literally being off the art world map, living in Reno, Nevada. This model of success in the

academic art world was unsatisfying, to say the least. What I experienced professionally in this timeframe played a big role in later developments in my creative practice moving more towards activism, cooperation, community building and collaboration.

**LL:** In your interviews and presentations, feminism emerges as a key influence on your work, a true gateway to your activism as a collaborative practice, establishing non-hierarchical relations with audience and participants. Can you expand a bit about the early philosophical influences on your approach?

**JD:** In my last year of graduate school, I was fortunate to have as a mentor on my MFA committee the amazing feminist artist Barbara DeGenevieve, who had recently been hired by SJSU. Being exposed at this stage to the thinking and making of feminist art (which had largely been absent in my arts education up to this point)—which is overtly political, collaborative and subversive—this was crucial towards giving me permission, in a way, to shift my own work towards considering new models of how to engage the world as an artist.

This all came to an inflection point for me in the early '90s, reading what became a pivotal book for me, *The Reenchantment of Art* (1991), by the art historian and scholar Suzi Gablik. This book ran so counter to how the art world functioned—how things were experienced and created. Gablik thoroughly questioned the post-modern, deconstructivist, disconnected way of functioning as an artist in the world.

She was basically saying that art needs to be relevant, about something other than itself and the self-absorbed chase for fame. She further framed the urgency of her argument in the growing environmental crisis, which is now so very prescient. At the time, her thinking and her approach were so radical and was such a refreshing departure from how I had been taught. Her position was so counter to the value systems of the "art world," where I was attempting to find "success." Her book helped me to rethink everything about who I was and who I wanted to be as an artist.

**LL:** When do you think these instances emerged in a more defined and structured way in your practice?

**JD:** I took a head-first dive into community-based practice as part of a large public commission I was awarded for the Reno Tahoe International Airport in 1997. The concept was very much informed by Gablik's ideas. The project involved going into the local community to engage with people and photograph 2000+ hands, each held up as if to say "hello" or "goodbye." These images were combined with the words "hello" or "goodbye" hand-written by the participants then overlaid on backgrounds of photographs of local natural color and textures. This was developed as a massive glass tile mural, printed using a new process developed by Canon.

The tragedy of this work was that about two-thirds of the way through the process, the company I worked with in Florida to manufacture the tiles, unbeknownst to me, and as a cost savings measure, changed printers from those required by Canon. When the mural was installed, after about a month, the improperly printed tiles faded. This resulted in a five-year legal nightmare. The work was eventually destroyed, or rather covered by large promotional banners for tourism in the area.

It was a heart-breaking experience that surely put me off of getting further involved in public art commissions, which I have eschewed ever since.

That said, it was during this five-year legal nightmare when I developed some of my first game works, as part of my escape was playing video games. What was first a distraction and escape into digital play, games spaces became an outlet for performing and doing experimental works reading poetry as in *Howl: Elite Force Voyager Online* (2001) or reenacting television shows, as in *Quake/Friends* (2003).[1] Through these works, I developed strategies to create a more connected, community-based and live engagement for online communities, which eventually led to working with others to make giant cardboard reproductions of my game assets and avatars, such as *The Cardboard Gandhi* (2008).[2]

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[1] See Joseph DeLappe, "*Howl: Elite Force Voyager Online*, 2001," accessed Jul 26, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/play/howl-elite-force-voyager-online/; Joseph DeLappe, "*Quake/Friends.1*, 2002-2003," accessed Jul 26, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/game-art/quakefriends/

[2] See Joseph DeLappe, "*Cardboard Gandhi*, 2008-2009," accessed Jul 26, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/project/cardboard-gandhi-2008-2009/

**LL:** You have tapped into a lot of elements that are recurring in your practice: the idea of engaging with the reality of a community, their lives in these early participatory and performative experiments and the idea of the negotiation of participatory practices.

This is quite interesting, because a participatory practice, by definition, envisages a shift of power and a shift of relation.

As you mentioned, following *Hello/Goodbye*, you dove into video games which eventually led to online performance in virtual spaces which added a strong participatory/collaborative element to the work. In 2006 you started the famous *dead-in-iraq*, that in some capacity inspired two major works around Mahatma Gandhi. You re-enacted Gandhi's *Salt March in Second Life*, engaging with the growing online community who visited you while marching on the treadmill at Eyebeam Art and Technology, NYC.[3] Following this, you spent nine months "virtually" as Gandhi, meditating in your prison cell. While incarcerated, you transcribed the infamous Torture memos that fed automatically to your Twitter and Facebook feeds, allowing you to engage with multiple online communities. As a final event, you organized a collaborative online music performance, *The gg hootenanny: Gandhi's Release Party and Global Gaming Singalong*.[4] What was significant about this event and how did you entail negotiating the participation of such an online event?

**JD:** After nine months of being Gandhi, 24/7, meditating and typing the torture memos from a virtual jail cell, one of my friends from the international Second Life-based performance group Second Front[5] commented half-jokingly, "Hey we want to break Gandhi out of prison!" I was taken aback and started thinking about this provocation, as I had been trying to come up with an ending for this nine month, 24/7 online performance. What I came up with was to create a celebrity-riddled concert along the lines of Live Aid—an event where famous people get together in support of a cause. I invited people from Second Life to participate in an event, *the gg*

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[3] See Joseph DeLappe, "*dead-in-iraq*, 2006-2011," accessed Jul 26, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/project/dead-in-iraq/; Joseph DeLappe, "*The Salt Satyagraha Online: Gandhi's March to Dandi in Second Life,* 2008," accessed Jul 26, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/game-art/mgandhis-march-to-dandi-in-second-life/

[4] See Joseph DeLappe, "*The gg hootenannny: Gandhi's Release Party and Global Gaming Singalong*, 2010," accessed Jul 26, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/curatorial/gg-hootenanny/

[5] See Second Front, "Who we are,", accessed Jul 26, 2021, https://www.secondfront.org/About/index.html

*hootenanny: Gandhi's Global Gaming Release Party*, where we would together sing songs of freedom and protest live with our avatars wearing celebrity skins.

In 2009, voice chat in virtual worlds and game spaces was a new and exciting feature. Previously in Second Life, communication between avatars was only feasible via text messaging. The newly introduced voice chat system was awkward, reliant on bandwidth and inadequate for trying to sing together across the internet—but that is exactly what we set out to do.

For the event, we scheduled four sessions, one-hour each, over a 24-hour period to allow for participation across time zones. To start the event, Second Front came with a bulldozer and broke down the jail cell to set Gandhi free. I shared a setlist on the project blog inviting people to join in to sing songs of freedom and protest ranging from Bob Dylan's *Masters of War* and *Give Peace a Chance* by the Plastic Ono Band to *A Change is Gonna Come* by Sam Cooke, among many others.

What we created was one of the earliest examples of using voice chat to sing and perform together online in real-time. There were people singing across the internet, live, from all over the world. In the session recordings, one can hear this wonderful, experimental, random mixing of instruments and voices, which was quite asynchronous, resulting in a beautiful noise that captured the essence of the moment. Imagine if The Shaggs and the Flaming Dragons of Middle Earth got together for a gig, it would likely sound something like this.

We had people show up as Prince Charles, Cicciolina, (the Hungarian-Italian porn star who once married Jeff Koons), the Kool-Aid Man, Hello Kitty, Pope Benedict XVI, Jim Morrison, Spongebob Squarepants, Robert Smith from The Cure, and Wonder Woman to name a few. It was wonderfully, ridiculously absurd and FUN… I played guitar and sang with some musician friends who joined in with me. Many commented after the event that this was the most joyful thing they had ever participated in online and that the experience was something quite special.

**LL:** The virtual experience of *gg hootenanny* was preceded by a materialization and embodied experience with the aforementioned *Cardboard Gandhi* (2008-2009). The group of Gandhi-inspired projects eventually led to a series of community-based sculptural works assembled with

small groups of students and locals, such as the *Drone Project* (2014)[6] and *Liberty Weeps* (2015)[7]. One of the other elements that I wanted to ask you, especially in relation to *The 1,000 Drones Project* (2014 and 2017; Figure 10.1),[8] is do you think that the use of gesture and repetition to create the sculptures was a meditative practice? Is there a meditative aspect to the process?

[insert figure 10.1 here]

Caption: Joseph DeLappe, *The 1000 Drones Project. A Participatory Memorial,* 2014 & 2017, student volunteers making paper drones, Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, 2017, and photo detail of the final installation. (photos, left, Joseph DeLappe, right, Robert Holmes)

ALT Text: On the left hand-side, there is a flyer that shows a description of the project in a box on the left, instructions in a box on the right and in the center a drone model cut out. On the right hand-side, there is a photo with the paper drone models installed, hanging from strings with names of the casualties.

**JD:** While I do think there can be a meditative aspect to these various works, the process of durational making is what leads to the meditative state. It is an offshoot rather than an intentional outcome, if that makes sense. I do a lot of work that is quite durational and factors in repetitive actions that are usually part of a larger whole. As with typing names of the dead in a game space, or sitting as Gandhi in jail over nine months, joining voice with others to sing together, or sharing thousands of drone rubber stamps with volunteers to stamp their cash—there are these smaller gestures that lead up to this larger whole.

In some ways, it reflects the very structure of the little polygon sculptures, as well: I spend 2 minutes scoring one bit of cardboard and then I do that 5,000 times over several weeks, and I have this very large form that comes together. For *1,000 Drones*, most participants would make at most five or ten of the paper drones that make up the larger work. So, it is probably not the kind of thing that gets us to the point of being deeply meditative. But in the end, I think when

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[6] Joseph DeLappe, "*The Drone Project*, 2014", accessed Aug 10, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/sculptureinstallation/the-drone-project/

[7] Joseph DeLappe, "*Liberty Weeps*, 2015", accessed Aug 10, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/sculptureinstallation/liberty-weeps/

[8] Joseph DeLappe, "*The 1,000 Drones - A Participatory Memorial*, 2014 & 2017", accessed Jul 26, 2021, http://www.delappe.net/sculptureinstallation/the-1000-drones---a-participatory-memorial/

we see the finished work as this larger whole, it can be quite a transformative experience. And perhaps more important is the contemplation of why they were encouraged to participate in the making of these works—thinking about the costs and consequences of drone warfare, one's complicity in such as Americans, to express some sense of grief, and to engage in a creative act on behalf of people being killed on the other side of the planet. The goal is to bring these issues home. It is through this collective act of creating a memorial where perhaps some sense of critical atonement might come into play.

**LL:** Well, the reflective aspect is there for sure. Also, the practice of creating a paper drone also relates to the *1,000 Cranes*, a tradition in Japan and a symbol of peace, which connects to the horror of atomic bombs being dropped on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. In this work, you link two conflicts—the war on terror and WWII—with these two interventions, along with the realities of drone attacks with the completely unexpected attacks on two Japanese cities.

The project pushed people to look at the drone and how it is utilized in warfare. You created a *file rouge* between two moments in time that might seem distant but share some elements such as the "blind" attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima with the anonymous drone bombings that bear dramatic consequences on survivors today. I think, in a sense, your work really stimulates reflection and intervention in people's lives.

**JD:** The intention is for people to understand how we are trained to look back on historic events and think "That's just so horrible what happened there." These drone memorials are a way to say, "It's happening now." So yes, it is definitely part of my thinking—to draw connections to history and what is going on in the present. I invited individuals to write a name of a person killed by one of our drones so we can individually and collectively move towards a place of shared memorialization—piercing that bubble of American exceptionalism—and to strongly question these realities through and while making work together.

**LL:** Yes, it is also the idea of grievability. The grievable person, which Judith Butler talks about.[9] This idea that it is not simply empathy, but it is actually seeing that these people are considered as grievable.

All these works raise ethical issues, both in terms of the content of the work, but also within the participatory aspect of making a work all together that ultimately goes under a name. What are your thoughts on this?

**JD:** It is important when I am asking others to engage in creative labor to be very clear as to the context for the work and also to give credit to all those involved. I don't seek to profit monetarily off of these projects, often working for free or for a modest fee depending on the resources of the organizations involved. These works were created, more often than not, for merely the price of materials. Something that has surprised me is how when working with others, from the *Cardboard Gandhi* through the various drone memorials, there is a sense of ownership from those working with me on these projects. An example is the *Drone Project* which was created onsite at Fresno State University. Working with students and volunteers, together we created a life size, full to scale reproduction of a predator drone out of yellow corrugated plastic. After building the drone, we wrote the names of drone casualties from North Waziristan upon the sculpture.

The two-week process of making the drone was intense and exhausting. On my website, the first image documenting this project is a group photo of those who worked on building this memorial. About two years after the project, I heard from one of the students involved who said that it was the most impactful thing he had done during his college years. There is power in making art together and it can be a transformative and meaningful experience.

[insert figure 10.2 here]
Caption: Joseph DeLappe, *The Drone Project* 2014, students, local activists and volunteers pose for a group photo, CSU Fresno, California. (photo Roe Borunda)

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[9] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

**LL:** These works are generally temporary and perhaps very much as reactions to the immediate social and political themes. Do you have any concerns over the longevity of these works or in the long-term efficacy of activist political art?

**JD:** For me, it is more about the process and the involvement, interaction, and conversations you have along the way in making projects than worrying about the longevity of the work, which is on purpose, in a way.

It's more about the gesture and the making, and the creation of a temporary community of people working together for a positive and achievable goal in the immediate. The making of artworks that somehow collectively question and remember the deaths of distant others can have a transformative effect. I have had such questions in the past. Honestly, I am more worried about our longevity as a species, than I am about whether this work is around in 30 years. The larger goal is how do we make a world where we can realistically, ethically and sustainably survive together and into the future? If what I am able to do working with others provides some kind of model for cooperative existence that might get us to that place, that is good enough for me.

## Participation Prompt

Board Game Intervention:

Working with a partner or a small group, choose an existing board game to reimagine focused on social and political themes, creating a new, playable version of the game in question- based on the original design and rules of play. Possibilities include: Candyland; Monopoly; Chess/Checkers; Sorry; The Game of Life, etc. Pick theme(s) both you and your partner or group care about. Consider this an opportunity to intervene, reinvent and disrupt the accepted content and context of popular, everyday board games by reimagining aspects of play; competition; cooperation and winning. This exercise can be taken as far as you wish to go. First, create a playable paper prototype of the game; play the game yourselves; work out any "bugs". The next step could be to create a finished playable board game.

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figure 10.1



Caption: Joseph DeLappe, *The 1000 Drones Project. A Participatory Memorial,* 2014 & 2017, student volunteers making paper drones, Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, 2017, and photo detail of the final installation.

figure 10.2
Caption: Joseph DeLappe, The Drone Project 2014, students, local activists and volunteers pose for a group photo, CSU Fresno, California. (photo Roe Borunda)

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