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## **Nick Cave's Community Collaborations, Installations and Provocations:**

### **An examination of an artist embodying Arts-Base Education Research**

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In this essay Jim Sanders (InSEA Treasurer) explores his quarter century observing the creative explorations of Chicago artist Nick Cave, his creative productions, performance and exhibition enterprises (1991-2016). In this essay Sanders considers Cave's community collaborations as forms of participatory action research that are approached through multiple arts-based research methods (see Sanders, 2006; Springgay, 2004; and Sullivan, 1993). Cave's creations have been lauded for their technological sophistication and recognized for the social commentaries he communicates by critics from New York City (2014), to San Francisco (2009) among scores of other publications. Cave's art works have been shown in more than 40 of the 50 United States. Internationally his artworks have been mounted in solo exhibitions across dozen of nations across Asia, Europe, Africa, Australia and North and South America. These exhibits demonstrate Cave's art historic grasp, and his aesthetic accomplishments, but my concern in this essay is to explore his provocative pedagogical innovations and caring address of under-served populations.

The envisioned presentation intended to present at AMESA in at 6 October University, conceptually aimed to examine Cave's visual and performing artworks,' and his career as one sustaining multilayered meanings and sociocultural re-imaginings; practices the author considers forms of arts-based education research. Such an approach, however, is not unique to Professor Cave's art.

## **Framing Examinations of Cave's Work as a form of Arts-Based Education Research**

Not dissimilar to Cave's commentaries on fashion and material culture several other artists have engaged in institutional critique. In example, Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992-1993), was grounded in rigorous historic research critically assessing objects in the Maryland Historical Society's collection. Performance works and videos by Andrea Fraser such as *Welcome to the Wadsworth* (1992) forefronts the self-interests of donors and their families. Equally arts educators in the late 20th and early 21<sup>st</sup> century have pursued many approaches to Arts Based Education Research. These approaches emerge from Dance (see Blumenfeld-Jones, 1995; and Snowber, 2002), Drama (Norris, 2000), Poetry (Predergast, Leggo, & Sameshima (Eds), 2009), and tenets of A/R/Tography advanced by Rita Irwin and colleagues at the University of British Columbia in Canada (see Irwin & DeCosson (2004)), in addition to approaches grounded in visual and performance arts (see Sullivan, 2005; and Garoian, 1999).

In the abstract to the article Irwin, et al (2006) published in *Studies in Art Education*, A/R/Tography is described,

... [as] a form of practice-based research steeped in the arts and education. Alongside other arts-based, arts-informed and aesthetically defined methodologies, a/r/tography is one of many emerging forms of inquiry that refer to the arts as a way of re-searching the world to enhance understanding. Yet, it goes even further by recognizing the educative potential of teaching and learning as acts of inquiry. (Irwin, et. al 2006)

## **An Examination of Nick Cave's Work As a Form of Arts-Based Education Research**

Similar to Irwin's description of A/r/tography, artist's like Nick Cave's can connect popular culture studies, urban anthropology, social and political commentary, varied pedagogical practices and institutional critiques in gestures amassed into a tangle of pursuits not dissimilar to the ways Karen Barad (2007) explores *Meeting the Universe Halfway... Quantum Physics and the Merging of Matter and Meaning*. Cave's works have been framed as public spectacles, and at other times as quietly challenging opportunities for audiences to dream anew. Cave's objects and films similarly may embrace whimsy, fantasy and play, or wrestle with difficult knowledge. Cave's artworks confront disquieting realities about devalued lives, contexts of political alterity, and can call attention to the import of community collaborations and sociocultural explorations that seek to create alternative realities through dialogical processes.

Given Cave's works have been presented in more than a dozen nations across five continents, and in 40 of the 50 United States, it would seem interests in his visionary practices and innovative forms are unquestionable. The author's AMESA presentation was intended to graphically illustrate ways Cave's work as research opened up public discourse, and emboldened community-based acts of self-determined visibility. Nick Cave's social actions, installations and performances embody ways artist's practices can be seen as forms of research and pedagogical practices undertaken in the interest of progressive social change. Remarking on Cave's exhibits and performances from Chicago, IL; Winston-Salem, NC; Allentown, PA; San Francisco, CA; Dallas, TX; Washington, DC; New York, NY; Detroit, MI; and Shreveport, LA the author aimed to concretely examine how an artist's inquiries can make differences in the world.

Dr. Sanders has previously presented and published papers on Cave's work at InSEA's European Regional conference in Canterbury, UK (2013); the InSEA World Congress in Melbourne, Australia (2014); the US Society for Education through Art (USSEA) in New York, NY (2015), and has cited his testimonies in publications from Fariello & Owen's (2004) *Objects and Meanings: Readings the Challenge the Norm* (2004), to authoring a catalog essay for Cave's Chicago Cultural Center *Soundsuits* exhibition (2006). Upon returning to the US after AMESEA

Sanders delivered a paper on Cave's work at the 2016 American Education Research Association (AERA) Conference in Washington, DC within the Artful Inquiry in the Visual and Performing Arts Special Interest Group; a group already inspired by the ways artists engage in research and can make a difference in the lives of participants and communities. At AERA the visuals that were to have punctuated Sanders' talk in Cairo all launched without a hitch, and for that reprieve he was most thankful. Despite the early (8:15 am) hour of the session, the intimate audience assembled readily engaged in a call and response that ensured the subject was explored in ways that were meaningful to varied audience members assembled.

Nick Cave's approach to art making and performance empowers community concerns to be explored without prescriptively framing any solutions or naming impacted subjects in ways that Stein (2004) suggests can at times make them the butt of a vituperous game of *the dozens* (where insults are leveled at affected population as a game). Embracing indeterminacy, ambiguity and the challenges engagements with democratic discourses entail, Cave's community collaborations and co-presentations open up spaces where urban populations can develop site-based solutions that are deeply thoughtful about and defer to others' standpoints and their readings of social stigmatization and positions of marginality.

### **The Ends Toward Which this Research Works and Art Engagements It Might Enable**

By sharing a quarter century of working with Nick Cave, the author hopes to encourage arts educators to introduce their students to Cave's work and working processes; as forms of learning that embrace differences and encourage that act through arts-based inquiry and creative engagement. Change-focused interventions engaging communities in democratic discourse modeled on those Cave's residencies have advanced can be reenacted in communities anywhere around the world. Such residencies can illustrate how creative encounters may productively lead to social transformation. The objective of Sanders' initially proposed AMESEA session was to explore community-based performance works of Chicago visual artist, sculptor, and performer

Nick Cave as a public pedagogue who broaches a wide array of critical social issues, and explores their intersections in ways that transcend spoken language and arithmetic representations. In doing this, the author hoped to reaffirm how such works of arts-based research can enable new understandings and ways of developing crucial cross-cultural social understandings while transcending language boundaries and the limitations of the spoken word.

The aim of Sanders' session was to explore how arts production as a form of research can be employed in ways that serve underserved populations. For Cave that research: a) addresses diverse communities responding to his work (audiences from pre-k students, families, the general public, racial minorities, students with varying disciplinary interests, arts collectors, artist and critical theorists, among others); b) explicates the critical issues the artist has long explored through his work, and c) opens up spaces where alternative solutions can be theorized in community settings by those whose lives are likely to be impacted.

### **Cave Themes and Approaches to their Examination**

A central critical social issue Cave has long explored has been racism. Racism-as manifest in Memphis, TN (4 April, 1968) when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, or in Los Angeles, CA (3 March 1991) when the unarmed Rodney King was beaten by police officers; many more recent illustrations can certainly be found in the Black Lives Matter movement, such as the protests unfolding in Ferguson, MO (9 August, 2014) following St. Louis police killing an unarmed Black teen named Michael Brown.

Cave has historically described his *Soundsuits* as remarking on Racial profiling and described the recycled materials from which they are made as signifying the discarded/disregarded lives that become repositioned as fiercely fabulous forms collected by museums, awe inspiring

audiences, and having stunning worth and beauty. Teaching students to read such symbolic representations, and how they might mindfully contemplate the power artists produce when, as performers, social activists and researchers they site their interventions, productions and projects in neighborhoods and communities rarely given public notice or considered capable of appreciating the extraordinary aesthetic experiences unfolding in their midst. These are spaces Cave remarks, remakes, and reclaims in the face of oppression and multiple technologies of erasure. In doing so he reaffirms all lives are sacred and deserve being valued as contributing to the complex cultural fabric of which we're all apart. In short, Cave's inquiring processes ask audiences to think about what it means to be human and in the world today!

### **Revisiting Selected Cave Projects and Mining their Meanings**

Other Cave projects have delighted thousands, such as the magnificent public spectacle he conceptualized that disrupted patterned everyday transport rituals, and celebrated major historic events, like the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the New York City Grand Central terminal *HERD Crossing* that featured dance interpretations of 60 students from the Alvin Ailey School of Dance (2013) see <http://creativetime.org/projects/herd-ny> prancing through the vast space of Vanderbilt Hall ritually twice-daily. Later in Detroit, MI Cave's *Soundsuit* performance in *Upright Detroit* (2015) brought public attention to neighborhoods seemingly abandoned by city fathers (the link to Cave's Here Hear video is at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpW1L1Jkmvo>) a major exhibition of recent new works by Cave at the Cranbrook Academy of Art opened the series of performances, and a PACKED Masonic Temple (a historic Detroit Landmark) celebrated the close of that six-month series of performances – each sited in a differing neighborhood, and/or attending to populations rarely arising to public attention (unless part of a tragic tale).

Between the two events described in the prior paragraph Cave's culminating performance for the U.S. State Department 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration for the Arts in the Embassies program, engaged High School students from the Duke Ellington High School for Performing Arts' Marching Jazz Band, and an Afrocentric/Washington, DC modern dance company that animated Cave's *Soundsuits* to the delight of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and 400 guest dignitaries. While assisting Cave in staging that performance, I witnessed the artist being honored by students of an Anacostia after-school arts program, whose resident artists were working with young children, and college age fashion design students from the Corcoran School of Art. In this context college age students worked with the younger participants in exploring Cave's work and considering how it spoke to them and what lessons they drew from it. An evening long performance culminating that year-long collaboration involved middle school aged students delivering powerful spoken word presentations while bathed in staged light and projections of those *Soundsuits* to which each was responding. Here too, the materials the artist uses, and the forms his fashions assume serve as spring boards for further inquiry into new creative expressions and involving unexpected combinations of community collaborators working toward their personally impassioned creative gestures. These were not prescriptive acts, but interstitial openings, and opportunities for participants to bring themselves to the materials and through the inquiring processes, consider multiple communities creating new works and new understandings. To this author, these are brilliant illustrations of how arts-based research can serve populations across sociopolitical and economic circumstances, and open up spaces and opportunities for engaging students in primary research and deeply contemplating the meaning and significance of the tangle of materials and artist processes and the meanings one may tease from their materiality.

Cave's most recent project considered was a year-long residency in Shreveport, Louisiana; a project culminating just days before AMESEEA convened in Cairo. *As Is*, the two-hour multi-act performance marked the project's completion and drew on the artistic talents of residents' collaborative engagement as researchers, and with artists of that community. Through dialogue, creative productions in the Shreveport Area Arts Council spaces and community social service centers, participating collaborators helped create a hauntingly beautiful matinee engaging multiple dance companies, a gospel choir, *the queen of bounce BIG FREEDIA*, an operatic Soprano, and clients of social service agencies who appear on stage, and created woven beaded blankets that served as props and symbols of these collaborator's life stories all interwoven into the *As Is* experience. As each glistening patterned blanket was unfurled to serve as a shroud protecting the artist's reclining form, the audience looking on in amazement witnessed the patterns shift and change as each new layer was placed over those that preceded it. Perhaps some in the audience picked up on how this gesture might serve as a metaphoric gesture confirming how our stories are always informed by histories and tales that precede them, and may inform those that follow our remarking.

As two-by-two, pairs of participating collaborators splayed their blankets for observation, a spoken word artist recited insights from tales these same collaborators had share in the blankets making, and the physical gesture of the glistening patterns intersections with the layers that preceded them. This redoubling gesture, accompanied by a violinist's mournful dirge seemed to rip open a space for more appreciative contemplations of the strife and suffering borne by these long ignored residents of Shreveport, whose tales have rarely been considered or recognized. This is just the first movement of *As Is* and it, along with subsequent acts called attention to the ways Nick Cave's art performance conceptualizations challenge, audiences to more deeply

contemplate those lives that seemingly have been disregarded, discarded, and perhaps could be appreciated *As Is*, just as earlier performance gestures Cave has orchestrated have delighted, amused, awed or engaged as audiences, and communities. Whether wrestling with dis-eased social altern position, or joyously engaging in delight, both can engage democratic discourse about social concerns and themes Cave's artworks have long brought to life.

### **Conclusion**

While it is tempting to tease out meanings in the many ways Nick Cave's sculptural forms have taken up commentaries addressing agricultural histories, abandonment, health concerns, fashion, commercialism, consumption, and myriad creative expressions, I'll resist doing so rather than challenging readers to wrestle with the rich ways he broaches each approach. It is in the wrestling with those subjects Cave takes on and wresting meanings from their forms that audiences, viewers, students and scholars can begin to create their own solutions to the issues the artist raises.

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