A Public Peace Path
Transforming Media and Teaching Self-Awareness through Creative Expression

ROSS W HOLZMAN

I make art in response to the way I think and feel. I also make art to influence the way others perceive the world around us. From my experience, I find that creative self-expression is one of the most powerful pathways to self-awareness. And thus my art, as an outlet to self-discovery, is the expression of my truth and a channel for inspiring thought, instigating action, and attempting to transform the way we think, act, and behave as loving and peaceful human beings.

In December 2002, while living in Los Angeles, having just returned from a year in India, I experienced a massive shift in consciousness. This experience completely changed my perception of the world and how I saw myself in relation to all things. During a week of profound transformation, I experienced the divine inter-related connectivity of all matter, felt peace, and saw the essence of who I am as love and light, creatively expressing myself through this human form.

In March of 2003, after George Bush announced that we were going to war with Iraq, a light exploded in my head, making it ultra clear that we are part of a large social experiment being narrated by the mass media. I immediately emailed friends and family asking them to save everything they could that looked like war. I collected hundreds of pounds of newspapers and countless magazines and began to

Figure 37.1 “Fun for All Ages,” Series: This is WAR! Mixed media: Iraq War newspaper collage, acrylic paint, pastels, and marker on canvas, 4’ x 6’, 2003.
slowly disseminate and dissect this material in preparation for a massive art project.

It was so evident to me that the role of the mass media is to infuse our world with the relentless dominant narrative of war and lies. My response to the violence and negativity was to reassemble the images and text of these newspapers through a collage technique in an attempt to not only show people how nasty and repetitious the information being portrayed really is, but to spark the question and conversation of “what does it mean?”

I made dozens of pieces, entitling the series “This is WAR!” focusing on all the prevalent subjects of the news: Bush, Saddam, smart bombs, soldiers, weapons, death, and casualties, and especially the glamorization of this war (see Figures 37.1, 37.2, and 37.3). I wanted people to (re)read the text and (re)view the images in order to really consider what the information being hoisted upon them was. I sought a reaction, an action, some way to raise a spark of an emotional response to the sickness of this war. I wanted to challenge my audience into finding a voice, expressing a feeling, or doing something in response to the way this mass media made them feel. I wanted people to deeply feel. “This is WAR!” asks you to consider who you are and how you relate to the hegemonic messages of violence, killing, and hate that were continuously being pushed onto your kitchen table.

The more I looked at the bombardment of messages from television, newspaper, and radio, I saw an unfortunate yet ironic parallel to the bunker buster bombs being dropped in Iraq; the more I realized that the entire media system in the United States is set up to push the fear, instigate uniformity, destroy uniqueness, and support the capitalistic consumerism of more, faster, better. There were very few uplifting, inspirational messages coming through to everyday folks. Instead of succumbing to these constant negative messages, I wanted my art to do something about it. Something public. Something that would disrupt the common assumptions about what the media was telling and (unwittingly) giving us. So I stopped working to transform the negativity and simply began focusing on generating the positive.

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Figure 37.2 “Body of Peace 1,” Series: This is WAR! Mixed media: Iraq War newspaper collage, acrylic paint, pastels, and marker on canvas, 10’ x 10’, artistic contributions done in collaboration at the Power to the Peaceful festival, September 2007.

Figure 37.3 “Body of Peace 1,” closeup.
I began painting large-scale, billboard size works on canvas with simple up-lifting slogans. As I developed these large scale “anti-billboards” my guiding question was, how can we collectively promote hope and peace, inspire love, and share the empowered feelings of self-worth in order that we can find peaceful and harmonious ways to co-exist? The emergent project, Banners for Peace, began when I painted two giant banners in the backyard and on the sidewalk outside my San Francisco apartment (see Figure 37.4). I wanted to create something large and noticeable to garner people’s attention towards something positive.

After completing several banners on my own, I decided to take the project to the people. I now use the Banners for Peace project to teach collaboration, community building, and peace practices in American schools and with public groups (see Figure 37.5). The aim is to paint self-empowering messages of hope and peace in collaboration to be used as inspiration for creating peace in our communities. It is through the collaborative creative process that I teach people how to access the depths of their heart, open to sharing their thoughts and feelings, and access that place of loving acceptance for themselves and those around them in hopes of making lasting positive impressions for change. These same ideals are also incorporated into another project, the Create Peace Postcard Project, where messages of hopefulness, peace, and transformation are transcending U.S. classrooms, communities, and even our borders (see Figure 37.6).

Figure 37.4 “Speak Truth,” Series: Banners for Peace. Acrylic house paint on canvas, 8’ x 26’, 2005. Photo: Ross W Holzman.

Figure 37.5 “Let’s Make a Difference,” Series: Banners for Peace, Mission High School, San Francisco. 25 students participated in this collaborative painting workshop, Winter 2008. Photo: Ross W Holzman.
I believe that through creative self-expression, especially ones that push public consciousness and awakening, we can learn about our selves and our relationship to the world around us. I also teach, through creative collaboration, how we can learn how to access our hearts, share love, and begin to work together for a common goal. It is from this place that I continue to promote the collaborative and creative processes of self-expression. I can only hope that with on-going efforts, the calm, quiet, and loving presence of the shared experiences of my teaching in the public sphere, participants and audiences alike will help to spread this ripple of hope and peace across the world.