

Julie Ault



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Introduction

This guide centers on two works: Julie Ault’s public artwork “Points of Entry” (2004) and Group Material’s influential project “Democracy” (1988-89). Although Ault continues to produce influential works, as detailed in the biography section, we’ve chosen these two projects for their deep engagement with themes of democracy, education, and community participation. These themes not only reflect the core values of A.R.T., but also resonate powerfully with the current cultural and political moment.

Guiding Questions

What kinds of access does a democracy require?

What is required for engaging with democracy in a critical, informed, and meaningful way?

Democracy, from the Greek demos (people) and kratos (rule), is a system of government in which power rests with the people—whether exercised directly or through elected representatives.

At its heart, democracy is defined by participation, accountability, and the collective pursuit of the common good: “a government of the people, by the people, for the people.”

Central to this vision is community—individuals coming together to deliberate, decide, and act in the interest of all.

This guide, through its guiding question and activities, explores what is required for engaging with democracy in a critical, informed, and meaningful way.

Activities

The following activities are structured to sequentially build on each other.

[Activity 1: Guiding Question Pre-Write](#)

[Activity 2: Points of Entry](#)

[Activity 3: Democracy](#)

Activities: Teens and Adults



“Nancy Spero: Paper Mirror,” curated by Julie Ault. MoMA PS1, Queens, New York, 2018.

Activity 1: Guiding Question Pre-Write

What kinds of access does a democracy require?

1. Before responding to the question, do a word map around “access.” Write it down on a piece of paper and draw a circle around it. Take 2-3 minutes and free associate or write down anything and everything that comes to mind around this word. Look at your word map and notice 2-3 patterns or surprises in your free association work. Write down what you notice and, if you can, turn and talk to someone about it.
2. Now do the same thing for “democracy.” Write it down on a piece of paper and draw a circle around it. Take 2-3 minutes and free associate or write down anything and everything that comes to mind around this word. Look at your word map and notice 2-3 patterns or surprises in your free association work. Write down what you notice and, if you can, turn and talk to someone about it.
3. You’ve thought about “access” and “democracy.” Now, respond to the Guiding Question: What kinds of access does a democracy require? This is not about having the right answer but about writing or listing down the kinds of access you think a democracy requires in order to exist and continue to exist.



Julie Ault, "Points of Entry," 2004. Installation view. Image courtesy Public Art at Queens College.



Julie Ault, "Points of Entry," 2004. Installation view. Image courtesy Public Art at Queens College.

Activity 2: Points of Entry

Julie Ault's public artwork "Points of Entry" is a site-specific project made in 2004 consisting of twelve quotations fabricated in stainless steel, paired and installed in proximity to one of the primary ground floor passageways (entrances/exits) of Powdermaker Hall, Queens College / City University of New York.

The work is described by the school in this way:

"Similar to courthouses and other civic buildings, educational institutions often proclaim a maxim at their entrances with a single motto or inspirational quotation. For 'Points of Entry,' Julie Ault extends and rethinks this custom using twelve quotations by historical and contemporary thinkers. This collection presents [or offers] diverse educational concepts and ideals concerning methods of communication and democratic access to education and imbues the building with voices of exemplary cultural figures. Installed in proximity to the primary doorways used to enter and exit Powdermaker Hall, 'Points of Entry' aims to arouse reflection and dialogue about educational subjects in and among the users of the building. Books from which the quotations are culled have been placed in the Rosenthal Library, along with other publications consulted by the artist while researching the subject."

1) Pre-writing

- What does "entry" mean? Even if this word seems obvious, look it up in the dictionary and write down 3-5 keywords from the definition that strike you as important or unexpected.
- What prevents or blocks entry? Consider this in relation to a building. Consider this in relation to college (or other sites of learning). Consider this in relation to a job or skill you have or want to acquire.
- What does having entry allow or promise? If you have entry, what would this help you to do or achieve?

2) What do you see as important “points of entry” in your own education journey?

– Another way to ask this question is what kinds of points of entry do you or did you need to really grow as a learner? (Did you need texts that mirrored you? Did you need a teacher who was more in tune with your needs? Did you need questions or content that interested you?)

– If you are an educator: what are examples of the points of entry you create for your own students? You can provide 1-3 examples for each.

3) In her artwork, Ault selected twelve quotations from a variety of educators and philosophers to place next to every “point of entry” around Powdermaker Hall, a building on campus where the education department resides (along with other academic departments). We invite you to engage with the quotations that make up her public artwork in this activity.

Read the twelve quotations selected by Ault here:

“The academy is not paradise. But learning is a place where paradise can be created.” — bell hooks

“Education is inherently an ethical and political act.” — Michael Apple

“Education for domestication is an act of transferring “knowledge,” whereas education for freedom is an act of knowledge and a process of transforming action that should be exercised on reality.” — Paulo Freire

“Thought is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions it offends or reconciles, attracts or repels, breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites; it cannot help but liberate and enslave.” — Michel Foucault

“Any experience, however trivial in its first appearance, is capable of assuming an indefinite richness of significance by extending its range of perceived connections.” — John Dewey

“Passionate teaching, like all teaching, is necessarily a social process, not just an individual performance.” — Robert L. Fried

“Political education prepares citizens to participate in consciously reproducing their society, and conscious social reproduction is the ideal not only of democratic education but also of democratic politics.” — Amy Gutmann

“...teaching and learning are matters of breaking through barriers—of expectation, of boredom, of predefinition.” — Maxine Greene

“Intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy...” —Simone Weil

“Not encouraging students to question knowledge, society, and experience tacitly endorses and supports the status quo.” —Ira Shor

“The Possible’s slow fuse is lit
By the Imagination” — Emily Dickinson

“The world is before you and you need not take it or leave it as it was when you came in.” — James Baldwin

- Choose one quote from Ault’s public artwork to close read and respond to.
- Write down the quote you chose. Next, write out or discuss with someone why you chose this particular quote. (2 min.)
- Read once and jot down a first impression or confusion. (2 min.)
- Read again, this time aloud. Jot down something new you noticed—this could be a word, a sound, something that doesn’t yet make sense, etc. (2 min.)
- Circle words you don’t know and look them up, writing down the definitions next to the quote.
- Put the quote into your own words (paraphrase).
- Analyze it by considering one or more of the following questions: What is this quote saying about education in the U.S.? What is this quote saying about democracy in the U.S.? What further questions do you have now that you’ve spent time with the quote?

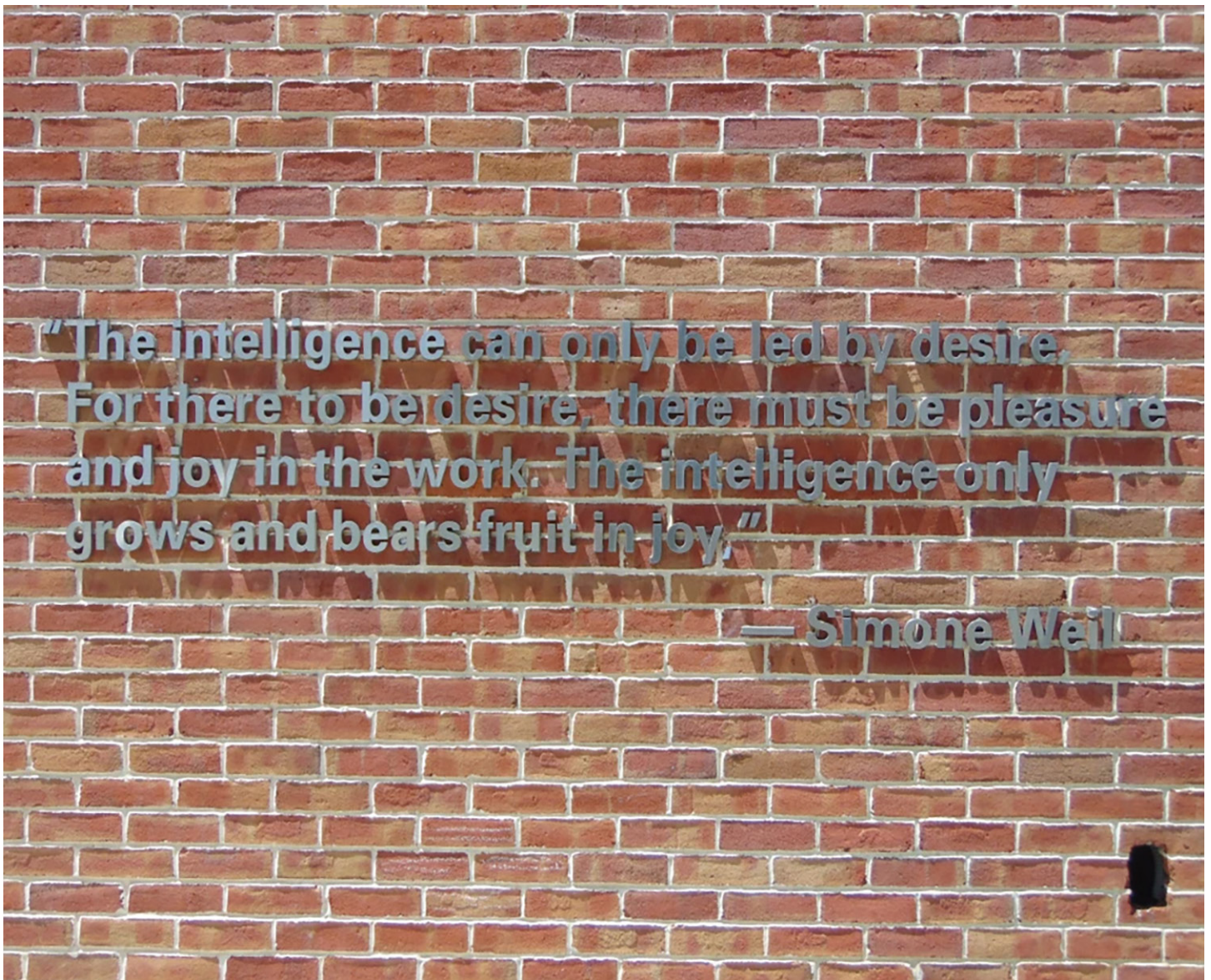
4) Given what you’ve written thus far, it’s your turn to create a public art piece in the spirit of Ault’s “Points of Entry.”

Choose from one of the two prompts below:

- Imagine you are an educator in your community.
Choose one quote you would place outside the door to your classroom or library and one quote inside the door to your classroom or library. You are welcome to choose more quotes if you have other points of entry just be sure they frame the doors on the outside and inside.
- Consider a space or institution in your community that needs more points of entry for community members. This can be a physical or virtual space.

Write down what this space/institution is and jot down a few reasons why it needs more points of entry for community members.

Now brainstorm at least two ideas around how you can create more or better points of entry. What can you change? Consider large and small changes that will invite more access and participation.



Julie Ault, "Points of Entry," 2004. Installation view. Image courtesy Public Art at Queens College.



Group Material, "Democracy: Education and Democracy." Installation view, 77 Wooster Street, New York City, September 14 – October 8, 1988. © Group Material. Photo: Ken Schles

Activity 3: Democracy

“Democracy” is a project by Group Material from the late 1980s held at Dia Art Foundation. Julie Ault was co-founder of Group Material, an artist collective active in New York between 1979 and 1996 that experimented with political models of artistic practice by staging thematic and site-specific exhibitions addressing topical social issues.

Then Dia directors Charles Wright and Gary Garrels describe the project as “a series of events conceived and directed by the artists’ collaborative Group Material over the course of more than two years (1988-89), including planning sessions; private roundtable discussions; a series of four exhibitions; and open public ‘town meetings.’ This composite form of an ‘exhibition’ or art project, under the project name ‘Democracy,’ explored the condition of democratic processes and democratic ideals in this country through specific issues of public education; politics and election; cultural participation; and the AIDS crisis.”

Many of the discussions and presentations were later published in the book, “Democracy: A Project by Group Material,” ed. Brian Wallis (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

For this activity, we invite you to choose a passage from their book to close read and discuss.

Here is our selection of passages.

“Participating in the system doesn’t mean that we have to identify with it, stop criticizing it, or stop improving the little piece of turf in which we operate.” Judge Bruce Wright, Justice , New York Supreme Court — Epigraph to the opening essay, “On Democracy,” by Group Material

“The subject that no one in the art world wants to talk about is usually politics. Yet, because every social or cultural relationship is a political one, we regard an understanding of the link between politics and culture as essential. “Politics” cannot be restricted to those arenas stipulated as such by professional politicians. Indeed, it is fundamental to our methodology to question every aspect of our cultural situation from a political point of view, to ask, “What politics inform accepted understandings of art and culture? Whose interests are served by such cultural conventions? How is culture made, and for whom is it made?” — “On Democracy,” by Group Material

Tim Rollins: Let’s start with a general question, a paradox really. And that is: one of the most cherished ideas in America, the rationale for compulsory education and public schooling in this country, is the belief that a genuine democracy cannot exist without the full education of all of its citizens. So how do you explain our obvious failure in this regard? Even the most optimistic people in government have to admit that the public school system in this country is failing. So the question is this: Does this relationship between democracy and mass education still exist, or is it simply an outdated, romantic notion? Or, to put it another way, is knowledge really power anymore?” — Roundtable discussion on “Education and Democracy,” May 21, 1988

“Encouraging students to speak, I tell them to imagine what it must mean to live in a culture where to speak one risks brutal punishment --- imprisonment, torture, death. I ask them to think about what it means that they lack the courage to speak in a culture where there are few if any consequences. Can their fear be understood solely as shyness or is it an expression of deeply embedded, socially constructed restrictions against speech in a culture of domination, a fear of owning one’s words, of taking a stand?

Audre Lorde's poem, "Litany for Survival," address our fear of speech and urges us to overcome it:

'And when we speak we are afraid
Our words will not be heard
Nor welcomed
But when we are silent
We are still afraid
So it is better to speak
Remembering
We were never meant to survive'

To understand that finding a voice is an essential part of liberation struggle -- for the oppressed, the exploited a necessary starting place -- a move in the direction of freedom, is important for those who stand in solidarity with us." — "'When I was a young soldier for the revolution': Coming to Voice," by bell hooks

We have two options listed below, one activity is a close reading exercise for one person and the other is a discussion activity for two or more people.

1) Close Reading:

Choose one of the quotes below that interests you.

– Spend some time reading the quote silently or aloud, looking up any words you might not know and writing down the definitions.

– Once you do so, reread the quote again and paraphrase it in one sentence. What is it saying? Now, write and talk back to the quote and use any of these questions to help you.

How is what the speaker or writer is saying relevant to today?

What personal connections can you make to what the speaker or writing is expressing?

In what way might you agree or disagree with the quote?

Pose your own questions and write them down!

2) Discussion

- Choose one or more of the quotes from Group Material's Democracy book to discuss.
- Spend some time reading the quote silently or aloud, looking up any words you might not know and writing down the definition.
- Once you do so, reread the quote again and paraphrase it in one sentence. What is it saying?
- Now, begin discussing the quote as a pair or group.
- Before you jump in, chose a discussion format to help facilitate the discussion. You can choose from this list: [Big List of Discussion Strategies](#).
- You can use any of the questions below to help you.
 - How is what the speaker or writer is saying relevant to today?
 - What personal connections can you make to what the speaker or writing is expressing?
 - In what way might you agree or disagree with the quote?
 - Pose your own questions and write them down!



Group Material, "Democracy: Education and Democracy." Installation view, 77 Wooster Street, New York City, September 14 – October 8, 1988. © Group Material. Photo: Ken Schles



Group Material, "Democracy: Education and Democracy." Installation view, 77 Wooster Street, New York City, September 14 – October 8, 1988. © Group Material. Photo: Ken Schles

Biography

Julie Ault (b. 1957) is an artist and writer whose collaborative and discipline-crossing practice interrogates how histories are retold and how they can effect change in the present. She is known for innovating new models of artistic form that encompass exhibition-making, publication, archiving, and collective research, producing work across a range of formats that interrogates how cultural production is shaped by, and can intervene in, wider social and political systems.

Ault's early work developed alongside her pivotal role as a co-founder of Group Material, an artists' collaborative active in New York between 1979 and 1996 that generated political models of artistic practice by staging thematic and site-specific exhibitions addressing topical social issues. Forming amidst a dynamic ecosystem of alternative art groups, and politicized through histories of anti-war, civil rights activism, and feminist models, Group Material comprised a shifting membership that included artists Patrick Brennan, Mundy McLaughlin, Marybeth Nelson, Tim Rollins, and Ault, later including Doug Ashford, Karen Ramspacher, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Their collaborations manifested in innovative and influential shows such as "The People's Choice (Arroz con Mango)" (1981), an exhibition of favorite art possessions and personal items on loan from residents of the Lower East Side block where the group was based; "Democracy" (1988–89), catalyzing a public interrogation of the titular theme through a rotating exhibition and "town hall" events; and "AIDS Timeline" (1989), unpacking the cultural-political ramifications of the AIDS epidemic and failed public response through a multi-layered chronology.

After the dissolution of Group Material, Ault continued to develop innovative, research-driven approaches to art-making—both individually and collaboratively—favoring organizing exhibitions, writing, and editing publications as her primary mediums. Significant exhibitions curated by Ault include "Afterlife: a constellation" (Whitney Museum, 2014 and Galerie Buchholz, 2016), and "Nancy Spero: Paper Mirror" (Museo Tamayo, 2018 and PS1/MoMA, 2019). Ault's writing chiefly

reflects longstanding collaborations and dialogues with fellow artists, among them Roni Horn, Danh Vo, Martin Beck, and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Ault has edited numerous publications such as “Alternative Art New York: 1965–1985” (University of Minnesota Press, 2002); “Felix Gonzalez-Torres”(Steidl/dangin, 2006); “Come Alive: The Spirited Art of Sister Corita,” (Four Corners Books, 2006); “Show and Tell: A Chronicle of Group Material” (Four Corners Books, 2010); “In Part: Writings by Julie Ault,” with Nicolas Linnert (Dancing Foxes Press, 2017); “Hidden in Plain Sight: Selected Writings of Karin Higa” (Dancing Foxes Press, 2022); “Corita Kent: Ordinary Things Will Be Signs for Us,” with Jason Fulford and Jordan Weitzman (J&L Books/Magic Hour Press, 2023), among numerous other projects. In 2011 A.R.T. Press published [“\(FC\) Two Cabins by JB,”](#) a book that documents and analyzes a body of work by James Benning.

Ault continues to investigate, through diverse artistic strategies, the agency that personal and collective histories have in the present and our possibilities for social change.

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Colophon

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Very special thank you Julie Ault.

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