

Phelps-Lipton
Moderation / Studio Art with a focus on Social Practice
Advisor / Daniella Dooling

Strengths + Weaknesses
How my work has evolved since coming to Bard
Courses completed @ Bard

February 18, 2021 a note from Madeleine George popped up in my inbox — an invitation to apply for the Bard Baccalaureate program. It was great to hear from her. In addition to managing the BPI admissions, Madeleine writes plays and we've crossed paths before in the NYC theater world. Our social circles heavily overlapped and I had photographed her and a group of fellow writers - 13P - for the NY Times.

If it had been any other year, I don't know if I would have applied to the program. I've always craved the exploration of ideas, but my life's circumstances had steered me away from organized study. Other than a photo-related workshop here and there, I hadn't considered the possibility of school for years. But here I was, in the thick of pandemic-determined isolation, unemployed (my job as a non-profit Communications Director had ended the November prior) and rolling solo for the first time ever.

And then there was the trick-or-treaters.

I live in a village in the western Catskills — Halloween here is a scene. Families from the surrounding agricultural areas travel in to trick-or-treat and in 2020, I found it impossible to not notice the shocking percentage of children at my door affected by developmental challenges.

What on earth was going on? The slightest scratch of Google uncovered a pile of terrible information. Multiple chemicals commonly used in conventional farming have detrimental effects on all stages of human development — horrifying! And activating.

Many of the same fresh fruits and veg that are considered “healthiest” are dense with insecticide residue, which can be neither washed off nor peeled away.

I was the child of fundamentalist teenagers. I left Christianity behind with my single digit years, but that early programming was formative. To my core, I am “a missionary every day,” or as is referred to in less dogmatic circles, a strategic mission-driven communicator and disruptor.

Safe, nourishing food must be normalized. It cannot be for the lucky few. Children are subject to the decisions of their parents, parents do what they can, offer what they can afford, know what information is easily accessed. I began to explore what it would / could mean for New York State to become the first “organic” state in the nation. I considered the possibility of activating the idea via various methods: big economic ideas, a media project intended for audiences outside of typical food / environmental circles of interest and political advocacy. Every week or so, I would review my progress with friend and collaborator, Michael Connor (Executive Director of Open MIC and Emmy Award winner). This is how I was spending my hours and energy when Bard came-a-calling.

When people ask how it’s going at Bard, I tell them that I’ve fallen into the honeypot. So much of Bard’s programming is in perfect alignment to the evolution and development of the Natural NY project, as well as the nourishment and growth of Heather the human being (the rigour of critical thought in a safe space, time spent making with other creative minds, etc.). But this wealth of riches has made choosing a major majorly challenging. Multi-Disciplinary study seemed ideal, but I could not convince David Shein of my pitch, something I called “Non-Studio Arts.” He pointed me in the direction of Human Rights, which didn’t seem quite wrong, but also not quite right. Many of my classes *were* cross-listed with human rights and I celebrate the connection to Thomas Keenan, but the program’s formal parameters felt to me siloing and claustrophobic. To it, I couldn’t commit.

Bethany Nohlgren suggested I connect with Daniella Dooling. Daniella recognized my situation straight off and suggested majoring in Studio Art with a focus on social practice. Which feels exactly right.

There are some things I have a handle on; I can tell a good story. I can harvest the pith and pass it along with only the lightest dash of finger-shaking. I have a sense of humor and on the best days, can weave it into my work. I can't resist beauty and it shows. I spend some time most mornings reading bell hooks and am committed to bringing her theories into everything I do. I'm currently practicing squinting my mind and (re) focusing on what she refers to in *belonging, a place of culture* as "oppositional aesthetics / beauty."

I'm just now beginning to recognize that I have a voice of my own and am venturing into video, thanks to studies with Sky Hopinka in Advanced Documentary Film-Making, Visual Story-Telling for Civic Engagement, (an OSUN class) with Adam Stepan and Great Political Essays with Masha Gessen. My craving for critical thought and confidence in taking the deep conceptual dive has been reinforced by Gessen's class.

The hours spent exploring humanity, conceptualization and theories of communication in Bewilderment of the Naive, (another OSUN class) with Zahid Rafiq practically makes me high.

I'm learning to trust my vision and try things (!) with Dave McKenzie in Extended Media II and with Ben Coonley in Video Projection, (whose class fills my mind with a whole kit of new skills and possibilities).

Exposure to Lynn Hunt and her idea that, "equality has to be learned," in Human Rights as Civil Rights has strengthened my belief in the connection (power) of story-telling and social disruption.

Many of these classes are offered outside of the Studio Art catalog. As I plan to create work for an audience beyond the gallery environment, the broader scope of study is preparing me well for my next stage of commitment and development.

I surely have some serious weak spots: I've spent very (very) little of my life creating work of my own and the pile of it is ridiculously skinny. I need to make more of it, spend more time making it and rolling around in it. I need to push against my tendency to tell the story straight. I'm an (embarrassingly) earnest person (ugh) and it shows. I need to be less tidy, let the edges fray, blow everything up some. And I've yet to find my balance between effort and ease, that sweet crack through which magic sneaks.

My skills could be stronger - a bunch of them are pretty first draft. I need to develop systems of fermentation, to evolve, gather moss and splash around. I'd like my work to be looser, more playful. Maybe be less mission driven. Maybe.

Bonus: the experience of spending time shoulder-to-shoulder with more conventional students has been super beneficial for me. I'm learning that it's okay to take up space. That it's okay to be experimental, okay to be unquantifiable. This last year has been the first I've ever spent in focused study and prioritizing myself. I'm experiencing a level of joy that's completely new to me.

I feel like a cat in the sun and am greedy for more.