

Divergent Consistencies

The Studio and Community Art of Hugh Merrill

1969-2009

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The production and consumption of art is an unsigned social contract between maker and viewer. The construction of norms and values for the art world are directly tied to the broader social fabric of whom it is a part. Even when art is produced in the depths of an individual's studio, seemingly for the artist's self-expressive impulses, art remains a collective and community action. The art object is only completed when viewed by the eyes of the audience and validated as art by the art establishment, society and community. At that moment the artwork enters into society to be evaluated, understood or misunderstood in the context of a specific time, place and set of social perceptions. It's meaning is forever derived from this bond to temporal perceptions and cultural influences.

The difference between the community artistic process and the individual studio journey is that the artist makes a conscious decision in the beginning of their process to collaborate with society/community. The artist no longer works in a monastic and insular fashion and the audience is no longer taken for granted as the faceless visitor looking at "wall art" in the museum or gallery. It is a collaboration with the audience, though now they cannot be defined strictly as such but also as participants, they have input into the content, process and final outcome. Therefore, Community based work is a continual dialogue between all involved.

Joseph Beuys, Amelia Mesa-Bains, Flix Gonzalez-Torres and David Hammons point out the pragmatism, materialism, and combativeness that is the hallmark of our dominant Anglo culture. They all believe that art provides a revitalizing process for individuals, communities and society. They reject the commercial, ego-based aesthetics of mainstream art production and seek to reinvent art making based on community values, social justice and action.

Building on their perceptions and work they help define community art as a force that compels personal and social transformation through the combination of rituals and symbols that inspire emotional connections to shared experience and social justice. Community art is intertwined with ritual and audience interaction. The artists are seen as social sculptors using their expertise in specialized theatrical and visual languages to lead, direct and facilitate community expression, celebration and discourse. The results of community art actions are not aesthetic, or derived from the sentimentality of feelings but are a method for creating a new way for people to see, experience, and take action.

Suzanne Lacy in her ground breaking book, Mapping the Terrain New Genre Public Art states:

“For the past three decades visual artists of varying backgrounds and perspectives have been working in a manner that resembles political and social activity but is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility. Dealing with some of the most profound issues of our time- toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, aging, gang warfare and cultural identity-- a group of visual artists has developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language. The source of these artworks’ structure is not exclusively visual or political information but rather an internal necessity perceived by the artist in collaboration with his or her audience.”

Philosopher John Dewey said, *“the local is the only universal, upon that all arts are built.”* This mirrors Amelia Mesa-Bains comparison of Chicano art to the mainstream saying, *“Chicano art is based on respecting the family and your community, I don’t see a lot of love and passion in the work I see in the Museums”*

In reflecting on the art audience David Hammons says, *“The art audience is the worst audience in the world. It’s overly educated, its conservative, its out to criticize not to understand, and it never has any fun. Why should I spend my time playing to that audience? The street audience is much more human, and their opinion is from the heart.”*

It is worth repeating Joseph Beuys thoughts on the role of the artist, *“Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of our senile social system that continues to totter along the death line...I am not a teacher who tells his students only to think. I say act: do something, I ask for a result.”*

“I don’t want people to feel...I want the public to be informed, moved to action. Feeling is too easy.” --Gonzalez-Torres

“There are no ordinary people.” --C.S. Lewis

These artists have a belief in the intuitive creative potential of what Hammonds refers to as everyday people and the ability of art to fundamentally change the way these individuals perceive and act in their communities. Along side social critics they also believe that art is simultaneously a spiritual and political action, an action that is meant to actively function in creating personal and social change.





Criterion for Community Art

The term community art is at best vague and overlaps ideas concerning public art, one-percent projects, art in situ and guerrilla art actions. Lucy Lippard, writer, curator and activist, points to an art that goes beyond the heroic condescension of art for the people, or the universal language of abstraction to a more modest position in which art strives for local context and cultural authenticity. This idea asks for art to come from the fabric of community and be made within the context of community. It asks artists to facilitate, listen and collaborate.

In community art it is the involvement of the “trained” professional artist who has special knowledge of visual and theatrical language that significantly legitimates the art making. The participation of the socially validated artist, the acknowledged expert, contributes to the activity becoming art and not protest, festival or celebration. Professor Beth Krinsky in her book, *Engaging Classrooms and Communities Through Art*, describes the need for professional artists:

“From a sociological perspective the community artist represents

the institutions of the art world and the legitimized by society to define the norms of creative interaction and the standards of artistic expression. Applied to the construct of community art as ritual with the power to invoke and demarcate change the community artist can be thought of as having the authority role comparable to that of a ritual elder facilitating ritual.”

- Community art is functional not purely aesthetic.
- It is not imposed on the community but derives from direct interaction between artist and the community.
- The artworks are created from time and experience in the community.
- Community art is the transformation from a fractured society into a communal society.
- Creativity and imagination are the first steps and processes for imagining and moving toward a better future. They break hegemonic thinking and barriers of the status quo.
- Art is validated by cultural and social context.
- Community art is a process, not a product. This process has long lasting effects, providing the community with methods for evolving personal, political and social changes.
- Art actions may lead to political action. But equally as valuable, as the works of Mesa-Bains portray, is an art that nurtures lost intuitive processes. These processes dictate healing, and provide new grounding for ethical, social and spiritual insight.
- Community art is a process that fosters awareness and is a celebration of other’s aliveness. Community art functions to move human potential from its static state to a dynamic force for change.