

Divergent Consistencies

The Studio and Community Art of Hugh Merrill, 1969-2009

Presented by Leedy-Voukos Art Center, September 4-27, 2009
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Millennium Voices/Portrait of Self Arts and Cultural Center of Hollywood Florida 1999-2000

Community art is a process that nurtures awareness and celebrations of others' aliveness... a process to move the community from the habit of consuming and watching culture to the ritual of producing and articulating culture.

–Hugh Merrill–

Recreating a Community Through Listener-Centered Art
Heather Lustfeldt, Curatorial Assistant H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute.

Many artists are increasingly finding voices and roles within the public sphere. Dialogues based in creative thinking and collaboration guide successful community based art, posing new challenges for artists. The dissolution of Modernist canons espousing elitist distinctions between artists and members of society is a triumph of Post-Modernist praxis, encouraging reinterpretation of the contemporary artist's role as a member of society rather than a distant, disengaged observer. Coined "new genre public art," this art form is experiential and based on interaction with an audience and place. Collaborating and communication within a public sphere, artists working within this genre create participatory strategies for engagement and exchange between themselves and community.

Artist/Educator Hugh Merrill enacts such methodologies through community art projects encompassing participation, self-affirmation and youth education. Heightening a sense of community through investigation of self-identity and collaboration define the project, Millennium Voices/Portrait of Self, in Dania Beach Florida. This project involved the entire community of Dania Elementary school. Lasting nearly one year, from May 1999 to May 2000, Merrill made five trips to Dania to organize and facilitate this unique, creative interaction.

Three distinct components frame Millennium Voices/ Portrait of Self. One aspect engaged the students in collecting personal archives, including copies of old family pictures, documents such as birth certificates, images of favorite objects and toys, personal notes, drawings, scraps of material and the like.

Collected and compiled into notebooks over the course of several months, the process was an exercise in self-identity



and memory resulting in what Merrill describes “as a lifetime living work of art having both function and a lifetime goal outside style and aesthetic content.”

The creation of “a living communal archive” through collaboration between students teachers, parents and administrators, was then created inside the school. Collections of black and white photocopies included images of students’ hands toys and objects, family pictures, old class photos of teachers and candid photographs of students and teachers taken by Merrill. In a group effort, the students and teachers installed these archival images in a layered collage covering the various walls of the school. Merrill explains the premise for Millennium voices/Portrait of Self as follows:

“The issue is how we use art to change a community’s relation to an institution—then change the way an institution see itself so as to support the identity of the community—giving itself up to acknowledge your life and your heritage. Letting all of the kids put up photocopies of their family archives on the walls of the school is the creation of such a relationship. With the images up, the kids own the wall space; it’s about them individually and about creating individual ownership of a public institution.”

As a lasting component of the process, Merrill selected from the collage creating a 150 foot graphic mural he describes as a “distillation” of the many images and experiences of the community interaction. The mural—a combination of painting, drawing, and traditional printmaking—is a digitally manipulated montage. Ultimately printed onto vinyl with special ink the mural is a permanent installation spanning three buildings of the school and fastened directly to the concrete walls. It faces a busy highway (Federal Highway) dividing the school from a failed vacant strip-mall. Abundant billboard advertising along the highway reinforces the commercial environs of the school and surrounding neighborhoods. Merrill references these factors in the mural augmented by a temporary installation of complementary graphic adhered to the school’s surrounding sidewalks, a spontaneous encounter and visual cue for pedestrians to contemplate the nearby mural.



Looming eyes of children stare out from the mural, interspersed with fragmented portraits and vernacular images articulating a sense of history and place. Colorful strands of Seminole Indians indigenous to the area, but displaced in the event of colonization, also appear. Slices of red tomato reference Dania as a farming community that once produced huge crops of tomatoes eventually supplanted by housing and development. Collages of individual teachers past and present, group school pictures, images of children’s palms and the dangerous highway commingle. Bright yellow and blue skids transverse across and amidst the images, suggestive of speed and direction.

Through this visual *mélange*, Merrill creates a subtle subversion- a critique of commercialism , mass media influences and commodification of children-by creating an artwork that duplicates a commercial construct, but defies commercial aims. The piece is a hybrid of vernacular murals and bill board advertising. The eyes of the children—unblinking, questioning and disquieting are not trying to sell a product, although the nature of the work begs this question, provoking a complex array of interpretations.

An interest in populism and consideration of audience has guided Merrill since graduating with an MFA from Yale in 1975. At that time, many artists heralded a more democratic inclusive way of making art. Environmental concerns, issues of equality for women and minorities, and a desire to affect communities in a positive way

informed their conceptions. For example Judith Baca, a native of Las Angeles, enacted community art projects through large scale murals such as the Great Wall of Las Angeles. Begun in 1976, it was intended as an exercise in free speech, expression and cooperation among a wide range of participants. "Spanning 2,400 feet along a flood control channel wall of the Los Angeles river, a vast mural depicts the cultural history of Los Angeles, replete with minorities, immigrants and woman. Baca directed the project, employing hundreds of inner city teenagers including gang members, who painted the mural over the course of several summers. Cooperation from various organizations and community members exemplified an artistic endeavor where many voices and views were expressed and heard."

Hearing and imparting community voices through engagement and collaboration are inherent in Millennium Voices/Portrait of Self. Confronting a broader audience via subversion of public, commercial advertising is also a key component. Merrill incorporates both interaction and process into a public message intended as a layered pointed dialogue.

Utilizing euphemistic visual and text based language, artists have used billboards to impart often hard hitting acutely politicized messages to the masses over the past several decades. Barbara Krueger, David Hammons, Flex Gonzalez-Torres, and the New York artist collective Group Material are just a few examples of artists who have sought voices outside the museum confines to confront broad audiences with highly charged social and political issues.

Since the late 1960's, many artists have incorporated visual education and creative expression to augment literacy outside of an institutional framework, such as Allen Kaprow, with his endeavor Project Other Ways involving elementary students in Berkeley, California. Since the early 1980's, New York artist Tim Rollins has lead young people in the South Bronx to aesthetic expression under the collaborative name Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival). Merrill also conflates the educational process, community involvement, and sociological critique in all of his community art projects.

Merrill began teaching at the Kansas City Art Institute in 1976 where he soon became a professor of painting and printmaking. Utilizing both traditional printmaking techniques and cutting edge digital technologies, Merrill enacts a crossover praxis with in his teaching, studio practice and community-based art. From 1985 to 1998, he organized a collaborative print exchange program with two high schools—one in Kansas City and one in Spring, Texas. Merrill's curricula also includes courses in which art students collaborate with veterans, senior citizens, and homeless children.

He considers his studio work as visionary and personal, informed by his inner voice. As a teacher and artist he encourages others to use their own inner voices. As a teacher and artist, he encourages others to use their own inner voices, which, within a public milieu, became collaborative and communal. For Merrill, these processes are mutually supportive, intermingled and organic. Like-minded approaches and philosophies indicated a growing interest among educators in fostering creatively through exchanges between artists, community members and institutions, expanding a pedagogical idiom within educational systems that proactively engages the arts.

Millennium Voices/Portrait of Self, is the most recent chapter in a continuing project, Portrait of Self, begun by Merrill in 1996 in Kansas City. As a visiting artist at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Merrill conceived his first archiving collaboration with a group of inner city at risk youths from an area high school, the Paseo Academy. For one year, the students created visual archives in notebooks, like the process enacted by the Dania elementary students but more highly charged with references to sex and drugs, as one might expect from inner city teens.

Ultimately, the archives were shown at the Kemper Museum in tangent with an exhibition of assemblages by Christian Boltanski, who collaborated with Merrill on a large community art project at the Kemper, *Our City/Ourselves, Portrait of a Community*. Area residents were invited to bring photocopies of the first relative known to come to Kansas City to the Museum. These photo-copies were hung in a wall montage in one of the galleries. Through this collaboration with Boltanski, whose assemblages depicted haunting portraits of child victims of the Holocaust, Merrill honed his strategies towards educational, interactive projects within communities. A recently implemented community project in Kansas City Studio 150 further illustrates this intention. Involving 60 area teens in a two month long project aimed at job training through the arts, Merrill participated by heading a program called *Portrait of Self: Studio 150*. Integrating philosophies of visual literacy and creative thinking with digital photography, drawing and other media, Merrill constructed an atmosphere of collaborative thinking and experimentation with teens of varying backgrounds. Within the context of a public park, the teens were removed from constrained institutional constructs, thus fostering an integrative acceptance among the participants. Merrill observed, “you have to get beyond the confrontation... the art making takes them out of socially restrictive confines and builds relationships where there was once suspicion, even hate.”



Traversing territories of education, community and art, Merrill is an example of an artist working within a new genre sensibility of art focused on educational and healing values within communities. Of utmost concern for Merrill and others in the twenty-first century is the enforcement of community restoration through the arts as a part of daily life. The philosopher John Dewey, in 1934, expressed great concern over the separation of art from everyday experience. “When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance.” He found that the solution to this dilemma would be to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and suffering that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”

Art and cultural critic, Suzi Bablic, expands upon this notion, suggesting a “paradigm shift” for an art based in community, empathy and listening, rather than isolated, vision-based creations that exclude an audience. “Because this art is listener-centered rather than vision-oriented, it cannot be fully realized through modes of self expression: it can only come into its own through dialogue, as open conversation, in which one listens to and includes other voices. For many artists now this means letting previously excluded groups speak directly of their own experience. The audience becomes an active component of the work and is part of the process.”

Millennium Voice/Portrait of Self exemplifies a strategy of engagement between artist and community, self-expression through the visual arts and education through creativity. The result of Merrill’s strategy, an aesthetic distillation of an internal community process, becomes a revelatory window for an external public. It entices a viewer through lively colors and graphic manipulations within its composition. But more importantly, it poses questions challenges and inferences, all of which will strike a random observer differently. At its heart, the mural implores a viewer through the eyes of children who look toward us for guidance. In a world that too often manipulates young people, viewing them once as commodities and marketing tools, we must ask ourselves if the guidance we offer is enough.

–Heather Lustfeldt, Curatorial Assistant H&R Block Artspace at the Kansas City Art Institute.

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